

**Reading *King Lear* on Screen from a
Genre Perspective:
a Critical and Creative Response**

By Yvonne Griggs

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Abstract

This thesis is both theory-based and practice-based; the academic research undertaken informs the practical decisions made in relation to the writing of a screenplay inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear*. I engage at a creative level with the theoretical 'positions' of adaptation theorists and examine closely existing screen adaptations of *King Lear*.

My study explores these screen adaptations of *King Lear* through the lens of genre theory. As a concept, genre provides a critical construct which opens up intriguing and as yet uncharted avenues of debate: rather than following set patterns of scholarly discussion which tend to revolve around literary reference points and literary critical frameworks that inevitably lead to the prioritisation of the literary text, I take a genre-centred perspective, reading existing screen versions of *King Lear* in terms of their relationship to genre cinema. The thesis offers a new critical entry point, using the concept of genre as a construct that foregrounds the intertextual dependency of the source text and its cinematic offspring. It also seeks to bridge the critical divide between those scholars who approach adaptations of Shakespeare on screen from a literary perspective and those who are working from the film academic's standpoint; it works towards the convergence of the two disciplines at both a critical and a practical level.

Adaptations which have historically fallen into the category of 'canonised' Shakespeare on screen are examined here as genre products, and films which defy genre definition are read in terms of their relationship to generic classification. The critical neglect of mainstream genre reworkings of the *King Lear* narrative is also addressed, due emphasis being placed upon the significant contributions made by such films. After considering the process of adapting Shakespeare's plays to

screen, I focus on analysis of the wide range of genre-based film versions of *King Lear*, from western to gangster film, from melodrama to road movie. I then consider those films that seem to operate outside the realms of mainstream genre cinema. Finally, by writing and critiquing a feature length film adaptation of *King Lear* as both a creative and an academic exercise, I chart my adaptation's journey towards reconfiguration as a piece of genre cinema.

Table of Contents

List of illustrations	1-2
Introduction	3-19
Chapter One: The ‘Quantum Leap’ Approach to Adaptation	
1.1 The ‘Art’ of Adaptation: Translating the Bard to the Big Screen	20-37
1.2 Screen Adaptations of <i>King Lear</i>	37-46
1.3 <i>King Lear</i> and the Sci-fi Horror Genre	46-52
1.4 The Role of the Adapter	52-56
 Chapter Two: <i>King Lear</i> and Genre Cinema	
2.1 Genre Creativity and Film Adaptations of <i>King Lear</i>	57-65
2.2 Adopting a Genre Framework	65-69
2.3 Grigori Kozintsev’s <i>Korol Lir</i> (1970)	
2.3 (i) On the Road	70-87
2.3 (ii) The Quest for Redemption: an illustrative analysis of the opening moments	88-100
2.4 “All our lives we looked out for each other the way motherless children tend to do”: <i>King Lear</i> as Melodrama	101-112
2.5 <i>King Lear</i> as Western Elegy	113-125
2.6 Akira Kurosawa’s <i>Ran</i> (1985)	
2.6 (i) Chaos on the Western Frontier	126-139
2.6 (ii) A Question of Identity: an illustrative analysis of the opening sequences	139-158

2.7 “Humanity must perforce prey upon itself like monsters of the deep”: <i>King Lear</i> as Urban Gangster Movie	
2.7 (i) The ‘Tragic’ Gangster	159-164
2.7 (ii) Displacing the Patriarchal Family: <i>House of Strangers</i> (1949)	165-171
2.7 (iii) Mafia Father Figures: <i>The Godfather Trilogy</i>	171-177
2.7 (iv) Gangster <i>Lear</i> as Morality Tale: <i>My Kingdom</i> (2001)	178-190
Chapter Three: “Trashing the Cozy Citadel of Narrative Cinema”	
3.1 <i>King Lear</i> goes ‘Art House’	191-196
3.2 Peter Brook’s <i>King Lear</i> (1971)	
3.2 (i) “A Hollywood Showman’s Nightmare?”	197-213
3.2 (ii) An Unconscious Desire for Death:an illustrative analysis of the opening moments	213-234
3.3 Shakespeare as ‘Living Sculpture’: Steve Rumbelow’s <i>King Lear</i> (1976)	235-244
3.4 “Meantime we shall express our darker purpose”: Jean-Luc Godard’s <i>King Lear</i> (1987)	245-261
3.5 ‘Radical art phalanx’ versus ‘clever flag of PR convenience’: Kristian Levring’s <i>The King is Alive</i> (2001)	262-281
Conclusion	282-286
Bibliography	287-298
Selective Filmography	298-300

Appendices

Appendix 1 'Only Connect': A Critique of the Screenplay 301-322

Appendix 2 *ContaKt*, a screen adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

(script) 1-96

Appendix 3 Published articles: *Literature Film Quarterly*, Vol. 35,
No.2, 2007

(a) *King Lear* as Western Elegy 92-100

(b) "All our lives we looked out for each other the way

motherless children tend to do": *King Lear* as Melodrama 101-107

List of Illustrations

- 2.1 *Korol Lir* (1970)
- 2.2 *Korol Lir* (1970)
- 2.3 *Korol Lir* (1970)
- 2.4 *Korol Lir* (1970)
- 2.5 *Korol Lir* (1970)
- 2.6 *Korol Lir* (1970)
- 2.7 *Korol Lir* (1970)
- 2.8 *Korol Lir* (1970)
- 2.9 *Korol Lir* (1970)
- 2.10 *Korol Lir* (1970)

- 2.11 *A Thousand Acres* (1997)
- 2.12 *A Thousand Acres* (1997)

- 2.13 *Broken Lance* (1954)
- 2.14 *Broken Lance* (1954)
- 2.15 *Broken Lance* (1954)
- 2.16 *Broken Lance* (1954)

- 2.17 *Ran* (1985)
- 2.18 *Ran* (1985)
- 2.19 *Ran* (1985)
- 2.20 *Ran* (1985)
- 2.21 *Ran* (1985)
- 2.22 *Ran* (1985)
- 2.23 *Ran* (1985)
- 2.24 *Ran* (1985)
- 2.25 *Ran* (1985)
- 2.26 *Ran* (1985)

- 2.27 *House of Strangers* (1949)
- 2.28 *House of Strangers* (1949)
- 2.29 *House of Strangers* (1949)

- 2.30 *The Godfather III* (1990)
- 2.31 *The Godfather III* (1990)

- 2.32 *My Kingdom* (2001)
- 2.33 *My Kingdom* (2001)
- 2.34 *My Kingdom* (2001)
- 2.35 *My Kingdom* (2001)
- 2.36 *My Kingdom* (2001)

- 3.1 *King Lear* (1971)
- 3.2 *King Lear* (1971)
- 3.3 *King Lear* (1971)
- 3.4 *King Lear* (1971)
- 3.5 *King Lear* (1971)
- 3.6 *King Lear* (1971)

3.7 *King Lear* (1971)
3.8 *King Lear* (1971)
3.9 *King Lear* (1971)
3.10 *King Lear* (1971)
3.11 *King Lear* (1971)
3.12 *King Lear* (1971)

3.13 *King Lear* (1987)
3.14 *King Lear* (1987)

3.15 *The King Is Alive* (2000)
3.16 *The King Is Alive* (2000)
3.17 *The King Is Alive* (2000)
3.18 *The King Is Alive* (2000)

App. 1 *Mad Max II Road Warrior* (1984)
App. 2 *28 Days Later* (2002)
App. 3 London Underground
App. 4 London Underground Stairway
App. 5 London Underground Escalator
App. 6 'Chronos Deveouring His Child'

Introduction

My approach to this thesis consists of two distinct yet interdependent areas of research; the body of theoretical and academic research undertaken informs the practice-based aspect of the study, which is primarily concerned with the writing of a screenplay inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Taking the unorthodox step of writing a screenplay as part of my thesis, I interrogate first-hand the considerations faced by the adapter, engaging at a creative level with theoretical 'positions' in relation to adaptation theories and examining closely the work of other adapters who have already ventured into the murky waters of adapting Shakespeare's play texts into the medium of film. The thesis considers how the narrative of *King Lear* contributes to and is reproduced in a range of film genres; such an approach offers a different perspective from that of existing studies of Shakespearean screen adaptations which continue, at least in part, to revolve around reductive fidelity issues and remain overwhelmingly preoccupied with establishing parallels between film text and play text, screen space and theatrical space, especially in relation to screen adaptations of *King Lear*.

Film and Literary Studies have maintained, historically, their own bias when dealing with screened Shakespeare, much to the detriment of meaningful interdisciplinary debate. Working from the perspective of a writer rather than from a purely academic standpoint has made me acutely aware of the mutual relationship between the two disciplines, particularly in relation to genre theory. Genre frameworks provide the adapter with story templates which serve as narrative shorthand for the cinema audience, effectively marrying cinema literacy with, in this instance, theatrical literacy through the shared understanding of how

genre operates whether in terms of theatrical tragedy or, for example, cinematic horror, melodrama or science fiction.

The relationship between film genre and literary genre is particularly revealing in any consideration of film adaptations of *King Lear* which is reincarnated in existing screen versions in genre forms as diverse as the western, the film noir, the gangster, melodrama and road movie; even its art house rebirths are open to genre classification as a specific type of product operating within a loose set of predetermined 'conventions'. As a concept, genre provides a critical construct which opens up avenues of meaningful debate, foregrounding the intertextual relationship between the Shakespearean source text and the resultant screen adaptation, yet existing scholarship pays little heed to the significance of genre frameworks. This thesis engages in an intensive exploration of how films of *King Lear* are constructed in accordance with or in opposition to film genre classifications.

The first section of the thesis looks closely at the adaptation process in relation to film translations of Shakespeare's works in general and of *King Lear* in particular; the rationale behind its genre-based reincarnation as the sci-fi horror film, *ContaKt*, is also explored from my perspective as adapter. The second section explores existing screen adaptations of *King Lear* through the lens of genre theory, presenting new ways of reading these films; cinematic offshoots, encompassing genre versions of *King Lear* as varied as the western and the melodrama, are considered alongside what are widely recognised as 'canonical' screen versions of the play. The final section examines those films which are consciously working outside the parameters of mainstream genre cinema. Given the wide scope and the film-specific nature of this study, I have confined text

selection to sound era film versions of *King Lear*. TV adaptations of Shakespeare's works, such as the TV western version of *King Lear*, *The King of Texas* (2002), and the BBC's 2005 *ShakespeaRe-Told* series, present further intriguing avenues for genre-related study but fall outside the parameters of this investigation.

As a writer engaged in the creation of a product which has to find a place within the film industry's market, I have also been acutely aware of market forces and industry-based issues affecting not only the production of my own film text and that of existing screened Shakespeare, but of similar 'industry' issues surrounding the production of Shakespeare's plays for the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. By adopting an industry-based point of reference to the study of Shakespearean screen adaptations of *King Lear* I am also able to explore the tenuous relationships between screen writer, screenplay and resultant film text, the script itself emerging more as a blue-print for further development than a revered, static piece of dramatic prose. Wherever possible I track existing adaptations, from the seed of an idea, to the screenplay and its emerging shooting scripts, to the end product presented on screen.

However, the rarity of shooting scripts and of published screenplays - only Peter Brook's shooting scripts for his film version of *King Lear* (1971), the screenplays of Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy (1972,1974,1990) are available in printed format - highlights the lack of literary status afforded to the art of screen writing. Interestingly, striking similarities emerge between the position of the modern day script writer and that of Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights. The revered Ur texts of our culture are the end product of a similar process of change and amendment in

response to performance and contemporary production influences: some 'Shakespearean' texts may, on the whole, resemble the initial ideas penned by Shakespeare but given the interventions experienced from the point of inspiration - or more often 'adaptation' - to the post-production moment of inscription it is doubtful that what has been transcribed is the undiluted work of one creator. In a cinematic context, for example, Brook's film text was altered to a marked extent, thematically and ideologically, during the process of production, no doubt in response to his own artistic leanings, though tempered always by considerations of audience and industry reception.

Although widely different in many respects, film adaptations of Shakespeare's *King Lear* share a resistance to the kind of period drama treatment so frequently realised in screen versions of his other tragedies: the *Lear* narrative is afforded a much wider scope, and yet there are few versions accepted into what may be deemed the 'canon' of Shakespeare on screen. Critical debate hinges around consideration of the 'canonised' versions: Brook's *King Lear*, Grigori Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* (1970) and Kurosawa's *Ran* are the mainstay of scholarly analysis, and it is tempting to follow this established pattern of debate, focusing discussion solely on what have come to be regarded as cinematic works of 'high art', worthy of a place alongside the so-called Shakespearean source text.¹ My study, whilst entering into the debate surrounding the 'canonised' versions of *King Lear*, expands the discussion, exploring the significance of the more inventive cinematic off-shoots which play with the *Lear* myth in order to create newly invigorated readings of a familiar narrative. Historically, screen adaptations of the *Lear* narrative which are openly seen to operate within a genre framework are given little critical attention from either the Shakespeare scholar or the film

scholar, though the more *avant-garde* approaches of writer/directors like Jean-Luc Godard (*King Lear*, 1987) and Kristian Levring (*The King Is Alive*, 2000) are afforded close examination by both camps, signalling a disconcerting elitism at the core of Shakespearean studies. These ‘art house’ approaches to adapting and filming Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (or aspects of it) have attracted considerable critical debate amongst renowned academics who invariably treat the texts as works of ‘high art’ and are preoccupied yet again with textual issues and authorship.

My study adopts a consciously non-elitist approach to the interrogation of existing screen versions of *King Lear*. Rather than following set patterns of scholarly debate I take a genre-centred perspective,² reading existing screen versions of *King Lear* in terms of their relationship to genre. Whilst, historically, Kozintsev’s *Korol Lir* and Kurosawa’s *Ran* have fallen into the category of ‘canonised’ Shakespeare on screen, in this thesis I argue that they should be regarded as genre products: the former shares many of the stylistic, thematic and structural characteristics of the road movie; the latter is not only a prime example of the *jidai-geki* genre,³ a genre unique to Japanese cinema, but also belongs to the genre traditions of the western, the epic and the horror film of Western cinema. A genre-conscious perspective opens up new ways of reading these two seminal texts. Yet for film texts which have clear affiliations with the Lear myth *and* are openly identifiable as genre product, the body of academic criticism is extremely limited, again suggesting a reticence to acknowledge their existence or their worth.⁴

The Hollywood western (*Broken Lance*, 1954) and a host of gangster films (*House of Strangers*, 1949, *The Godfather*, *The Godfather Part II*, *The Godfather*

Part III, My Kingdom, 2001) represent one end of the genre spectrum, their narratives centring on male-oriented quests and restoration of order. Jane Smiley and Jocelyn Moorhouse's revisionist version of the *Lear* story, realised in *A Thousand Acres* (1997) demonstrates the hybrid nature of Shakespeare's texts: the same basic narrative becomes a female-centred melodrama, with 'family' and attempted social reintegration at its core. Both ways of working with the source text's classic story design are sustainable, and demonstrate the inventiveness and commercial acumen of the writers/directors who choose to place this familiar narrative into different yet familiar cinematic frameworks. And though arguments surrounding the possibilities of successfully translating Shakespeare's verse to the cinema screen may continue to rage, there is little doubt that Shakespeare's narratives - themselves 'borrowings' from earlier sources - provide malleable story templates which translate to celluloid with ease.

During the course of my research I have engaged with many theoretical positions in relation to adaptations theory and genre theory. In the opening chapter, I enter the labyrinth of adaptation theory and engage with the work of a range of theorists, from Geoffrey Wagner to Gillian Parker, Michael Kline and Brian McFarlane, considering their classifications from the perspective of writer and analyst.⁵ Historically, the adaptation debate has been dominated by academics working from a literary bias, resulting in the inevitable privileging of literary source text; the artistic merit and independence of the resultant screen adaptation is seen to be superseded by its origins. Pioneering adaptations theorist, George Bluestone, relocates the debate, noting that the inferior status afforded to the adapted cinematic text lies with the *act* of translation which places the adaptation in the position of 'dependent', despite the creative possibilities of the new product

and its very different production mode.⁶ The work of Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Christian Metz and Seymour Chatman has led to a closer exploration of the connections between prose texts and their filmic ‘translations’, focusing on the transposition of narrative from one medium to another.⁷ In *Novel to Film* McFarlane builds on their work; by foregrounding the mechanisms of transference from prose to screen he cites ways of engaging with the adaptation process that sideline the reductive ‘fidelity to source text’ debate.⁸ But the mainstay of critical discussion still seems to centre on literary reference points and literary critical frameworks which results in the ongoing and inevitable prioritisation of the literary text.

Work in the field of adaptation by Imelda Whelehan and Deborah Cartmell does, however, shift the focus considerably from this literary framework to one which adopts a cultural studies framework, focusing on a cultural studies approach that “foregrounds the activities of reception and consumption” rather than outdated debates concerning the “cultural worthiness” of either the film adaptation or its literary source text.⁹ Whelehan and Cartmell build on this cultural studies approach in their recent publication, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*; by defining literary texts as “intertexts” as opposed to “primary sources” they argue that said literary texts form just a *part* of a “multiplicity of perspectives” at work in the creation of the screen adaptation.¹⁰ Such an approach opens up new avenues for critical exploration of not only the resultant adaptations but of the processes and cultural forces at work in their conception and production, leading us away from entrenched debates revolving around issues of ‘fidelity’ to a so-called ‘primary source’ text.

The writings of the latter theorists prove informative and thought-provoking but it is the ideas of theorists Robert Stam and Dudley Andrew which underpin the creative momentum of this study. In his recent publication, *The Theory and Practice of Adaptation*, Stam cites adaptation as part of an ongoing process of recycling in which the adapter should not feel constrained by either the historical or aesthetic ‘weight’ of the source text; he argues in favour of “conceptual reinterpretation” as a means of reinvigorating works of “high art.”¹¹ Andrew’s work in the field of adaptation theory has provided ways in to the reading of existing screen adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays and has informed my creative decision-making process; his call for adaptation to ensure a “dialectical interplay between the aesthetic forms of one period with the cinematic forms of our own period”¹² confirms the validity of my desire to resituate the *Lear* narrative from its original genre of staged tragedy to the contemporary filmic genre of sci-fi horror.

Having adopted a genre-based approach to the study of screened Shakespeare, the second chapter of my thesis draws heavily upon the work of genre theorist Thomas Schatz. The distinct genres of order and integration outlined by Schatz provide a working model against which to measure the various generic versions of celluloid Shakespeare, generating new ways to ‘read’ these film texts in relation to their thematic and ideological patterning as well as their audio-visual motifs. Genre is presented by Schatz as a “meaningful system” with a specific film grammar that “reorganizes [the] familiar in an original way.”¹³ My consideration of film as generic product also draws upon the ideas of film theorists Barry Langford and Barbara Creed; Creed’s work in the area of the horror genre in particular informs not only my reading of certain elements of existing screen

versions of *King Lear* but also the creative choices I have made when adapting the narrative to the sci-fi horror genre. Creed's study of the "Monstrous Other" in cinema¹⁴ opens up different ways of reading cinematic representation of women and invites alternative constructs of the 'feminine' within the *Lear* narrative.

Langford, like Schatz, suggests that a film's genre is inextricably linked to its production climate,¹⁵ and in line with this school of thought, my exploration of *Lear* on screen reflects each film's place within the film industry; the industry's cinematic trends and movements are seen to shape both style and chosen genre format and are thus as important as the source text being adapted.

Generic criticism is still regarded by some academics as an imprecise and debased art which is incapable of providing an aesthetic reading of film text (leading us into elitist territory yet again), but film theorist Leo Braudy's work in the area of genre studies highlights the significance of genre as a "highly democratic" and "unifi[ying] cultural force,"¹⁶ one that I argue, if applied to the study of Shakespeare on screen, allows us to transcend elitist views and to study these films from a fresh perspective. Even the films which defy genre definition are read here in terms of genre: their anti-genre stance provides fertile ground for debate and leads to ruminations about the classification of films. In chapter three considerations of genre and production climate continue to form the focus of my discussion in relation to those films which would seem to openly declare their anti-genre position. Film academic David Bordwell suggests that the art house movie is as convention-ridden as any genre film;¹⁷ the sometimes revered and often reviled screen writer Robert McKee argues that the *convention* of the art house film is its very unconventionality, its auteurist flourishes becoming as predictable as the shorthand of a genre film.¹⁸ Though approaching the art house

film from very different 'positions' both Bordwell and McKee agree that art house cinema, like mainstream genre cinema, is dependent upon a particular set of conventions, a particular type of narrative patterning. Due to its non-mainstream treatment of film grammar, I see Brook's *King Lear* as belonging to this 'anti-genre' classification, along with Godard's fragmented take on the *Lear* story, Steve Rumbelow's film essay (*King Lear*, 1976) and Leving's new wave Dogme film, *The King is Alive*. By exploring the significance of genre in the film industry, I find other ways in to the reading of the individual films and their relationship with the Shakespearean source text. Freed from what can be reductive comparisons with the specifics of the source text, the films are considered here in terms of their relationship with genre cinema and in terms of their place within cinematic trends and movements, which are in themselves a response to contemporary society and contemporary modes of production.

Throughout chapters one, two and three I have drawn upon the writings of both the 'bardophile' and the 'cinophile', questioning the significance of readings from critics like Normand Berlin¹⁹ whose preoccupation with textual fidelity precludes open debate, and favouring instead the readings of academics like Russell Jackson whose awareness of film as 'product' within a film specific market place provides a different, industry-based take on the adaptations process and its screened results. The work of many Shakespearians – Jack Jorgens, , Peter Donaldson, Stanley Wells, Anthony Davies, Kenneth Rothwell, Deborah Cartmell, Carol Rutter, Michael Anderegg²⁰ - has been influential within the field, consciously moving discussion away from the turgid fidelity debate into the realms of screen space; but often debate remains mired either in the textual and the theatrical, or focuses on the auteurist flourishes of those directors whose

renditions continue to operate within the realms of 'high art'. Rothwell's invaluable work as historian of cinematic Shakespeare has helped to shape the critical landscape; similarly, Davies is credited with shifting the focus of discussion of film text from the textual into the realms of the visual and the spatial.²¹ Donaldson also opens up new, psychoanalytical pathways into the critiquing of screened Shakespeare. But such readings continue to view the films from either a Shakespearean standpoint, seeking out parallels with the source text and its staged reincarnations, identifying ways in which the verse is realised in cinematic space as opposed to theatrical space, or from an auteurist standpoint, purposely investing the film with the same kind of aesthetic weight as the source text. The focus moves away from consideration of film text – or, indeed, play text - as product destined for a specific market place, and can inadvertently lead once more to reductive, 'fidelity' conscious readings of the films under review. John Collick's cultural studies centred approach²² proves the one refreshing exception to the prevailing climate of script and film-centred criticism in vogue prior to the nineties. Richard Burt and Linda Boose have also done much to shift the paradigm of critical debate in recent years, moving criticism away from a literary framework and into a more film-centred domain by exploring the popularisation and globalisation of screened Shakespeare;²³ however, Burt's conclusions do not always favour populist renditions of Shakespeare's works, leading us back to the same timeworn elitism found at the core of academia's response to screen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays.²⁴

Douglas Lanier argues that there has been a move away from 'script-centred' and 'film-centred' readings of Shakespearean cinema since the eighties, to a more 'ideology-centred'²⁵ engagement with text. But whilst the work of

academics like Graham Holderness,²⁶ Mark Thornton Burnett,²⁷ Kathy Howlett²⁸ or Courtney Lehmann,²⁹ moves the boundaries considerably into the realms of ideology, there is limited evidence of an 'ideology-centred' approach to the specific study of film adaptations of *King Lear*. Instead, the fidelity debate trundles on in various guises, the banner of elitism flying high. In *Framing Shakespeare* Kathy Howlett notes a general resistance to screened Shakespeare which fragments or fractures the Shakespearean source text; however, in recent years critical debate focusing on screen versions of *King Lear* has revolved around just this kind of fragmented and fractured deconstruction of Shakespeare's source text. Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* and Kristian Levring's *The King is Alive* have attracted a level of scholarly debate which is clearly disproportionate to their respective industry success. Often such debate serves the academic's own elitist agenda rather than offering any meaningful discussion of the film text itself.

The main body of academic debate continues to focus on the 'canonised' screen *Lears*, and whilst engaging with ideological concerns to a certain extent, the majority of critics, 'bardophile' or 'cinephile', approach the film text with one eye firmly focused either on the source text or its theatrical predecessors. Graham Holderness rightly criticises the prevailing scholarly predisposition to ignore or condemn films which either fail to be quantifiable by auteurist criteria or deviate from naturalistic renditions of Shakespeare's works on screen:³⁰ the critical neglect of genre reworkings of the *King Lear* narrative offers indisputable support for his position. Tony Howard³¹ offers some useful ways in to the reading of genre versions of the Lear myth, but his work thus far provides only an overview of what has been produced - there is no in-depth interrogation of the film texts or of their industry context. Similarly, Harry Keyishian opens up meaningful debate

concerning the significance of genre readings of screened Shakespeare,³² but his analyses remain rooted in ‘canonical’ screen versions of *Hamlet* and do little to further the critical exploration of genre-based cinematic offshoots.

An absence of notable auteurs (other than those working within the safe parameters of the heritage genre) exacerbates the problem of scholarly engagement with genre readings of Shakespeare’s plays. In reworkings of *King Lear* for the screen, for example, Frances Ford Coppola is the only ‘auteur’ working within the parameters of mainstream genre cinema. Cinematic versions of *King Lear* which do attract major critical attention – Brook’s *King Lear*, Kozintsev’s *Korol Lir*, Kurosawa’s *Ran*, Godard’s *King Lear* and Leving’s *The King is Alive* - are all too often viewed through the lens of auteur theory by film and Shakespeare scholar alike³³ to the detriment of their genre strengths. Elsie Walker points out that, all too often, screened Shakespeare is discussed in relation to claims about the director, thus “privileging auteurs” who function as a ‘stand-in’ for Shakespeare, the inference being that Shakespeare is conceived as “a precursor of Andrew Sarris’ auteur figure.”³⁴ This study refocuses the lens, moving debate away from auteurist readings of the film text to a genre-specific consideration of their construction and of their place within a contemporary film market place.

As the writer of a screen adaptation I am aware that the screenplay I have written will undoubtedly evolve into quite some ‘other’ product during the process of trying to attach funding and producers. I track the creative decision-making process in the final section of my thesis, highlighting the rationale behind my choice of the sci-fi horror genre, and providing new insights into the realities of adapting what has come to be regarded as a work of ‘high art’ into a work that can

find a place in today's competitive film market. My reconstruction of the master narrative, with its shift of emphasis away from ageing patriarchs, Lear and Gloucester, to their offspring, is similarly justified in narrative and industry terms. Furthermore, the inception of the screenplay's claustrophobic image system, its conscious intertextual referencing to earlier filmed versions of *King Lear* and to other science fiction/ horror films forms part of the commentary, as does discussion of its genre-driven character constructs. The writings of Robert McKee have provided invaluable insights into all matters creative, from story design to the inception of a believable cinematic landscape and the construction of credible archetypes. However, despite advice taken from screen writers like McKee and Syd Field, and the care and consideration evident in the conception of my screenplay, I willingly acknowledge that directorial slant will inevitably have a marked impact upon its ultimate style and form when realised on screen given the collaborative nature of the film industry.

For me, interviews with or the writings of the writer/director of the film have provided the most valuable insights into their film texts as has consideration of their place within contemporary industry frameworks and cinematic trends. Chris Sharratt's work on Crisis Cinema,³⁵ for example, has proved a more productive avenue of research and debate than much of my reading of existing work undertaken specifically on *King Lear* by Shakespeare academics to date, as has examining the impact of industry trends like the Dogme new wave or considering the adaptation from a screen writer's perspective. In her current survey of Shakespeare on film, Ramona Wray identifies an increasing scholarly attraction to examining film context rather than film content, making its "surrounding landscape" an area of fertile discussion.³⁶ The recently published

work of Emma French³⁷ offers a much needed production-centred focus to the reading of screened Shakespeare of the kind cited by Wray. Yet Wray also notes an increasing critical interest in film texts which have a more “tangential” connection to Shakespeare’s works; “How, and with what ideological effects, is the ‘Shakespearean’ reconfigured?” is now the pressing question.³⁸ The ‘reconfiguration’ of Shakespeare’s plays via genre frameworks is an established practice within the film industry - *Lear* as gangster-noir dates back to the late forties in the guise of *House of Strangers* - and scholarship, it seems, is at last ready to engage in serious critical consideration of the relationship between Shakespeare and such film products. The exploration of cinematic texts which reconfigure Shakespeare in relation to genre cinema forms the mainstay of my thesis and it is intended to be at the vanguard of this new type of questioning posed by Wray.

Wray’s closing remarks about the creative directions of future cinematic Shakespeare criticism serve to further underline the timeliness of my research; Carol Chillington Rutter’s rewriting of Ophelia’s funeral in *Hamlet* is cited as a way forward for critical examination of the relationship between source text and adaptation. Here, I have taken the matter a step further, writing and critiquing a feature length film adaptation of *King Lear* as both a creative and an academic exercise designed to open up new ways of reading both the originary text and its journey towards reconfiguration as a piece of genre cinema. French’s research into the marketing of Shakespeare on screen leads her to the conclusion that the most successful filmed Shakespeare adaptations are those that “effectively blur traditional binaries between high and low, art and commerce, and British heritage and Hollywood.”³⁹ I am hoping that my low budget Brit flick, with its ‘high art’

literary roots and its 'pop cult' generic packaging can blur the boundaries to produce a successful transformation of the Lear myth – one which can find a financially sound niche in today's film market place.

¹ Numerous influential Shakespeare scholars have contributed to the creation of a recognised 'canon' of screen versions: Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (London, 1977); Peter Donaldson, *Shakespearean Films/ Shakespearean Directors* (London, 1990); Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Olivier, Welles, Brook and Kurosawa* (Cambridge, 1990); Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare and the Moving Image* (Cambridge, 1999); Kenneth Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge, 1999).

² Seminal texts from genre theorists Steve Neale and Rick Altman inform my genre approach to screened Shakespeare: Rick Altman, *Film/ Genre* (London, 1999); Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," *Screen* 31.1, 1990; Steve Neale, *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (London, 2002).

³ The jidai-geki genre denotes a Japanese historical epic, set in the Edo period from 1600 to the mid 1800s and usually depicting the life of the samurai.

⁴ Only Robert Willson Jnr, *Shakespeare in Hollywood: 1929-1956* (New Jersey, 2000) and Tony Howard, "Shakespeare's Cinematic Offshoots," *The Cambridge Companion to Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000), offer commentary on mainstream genre versions of *King Lear*.

⁵ Geoffrey Wagner, *The Novel and Cinema* (Cranbury, 1975); M Klein and G Parker, eds. *The English Novel and the Movies* (New York, 1981); McFarlane, Brian. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford, 1996).

⁶ George Bluestone (1957), *Novels into Film* (Berkeley, repr. 1973).

⁷ Christian Metz *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (New York, 1974); Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. S Heath (Glasgow, 1977); Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method*, trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca, New York, 1980); Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London, 1990).

⁸ Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford, 1996).

⁹ Imelda Whelehan, "Adaptations: The Contemporary Dilemmas," *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, eds. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (London, 1999), p.18.

¹⁰ Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, "Introduction – Literature on Screen: a Synoptic View," *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, eds. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (Cambridge, 2007), p.3.

¹¹ Robert Stam, "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation," *Literature and Film: A Guide to Theory and Practice of Film Adaptations*, eds. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford, 2005).

¹² Dudley Andrew, "Concepts in Film Theory," (New York, 1970), *Film and Literature: An Introduction and a Reader*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (New Jersey, 1999).

¹³ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Film-making and the Studio System* (New York, 1981).

¹⁴ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, 1993).

¹⁵ Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh, 2005).

¹⁶ Leo Braudy, *Film Theory and Criticism: 6th edition*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁷ David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism*, Vol. IV, No. 1, Fall, 1979.

Literature/Film Quarterly, Vol. 15, 1977.

¹⁸ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (London, 1999).

¹⁹ Normand Berlin, "Peter Brook's Interpretation of *King Lear*: 'Nothing Will Come of Nothing'," *Literature /Film Quarterly*, Vol. 15, 1977.

²⁰ Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (London, 1977); Peter Donaldson, *Shakespearean Films/ Shakespearean Directors* (London, 1990); Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare and the Moving Image* (Cambridge, 1999); Kenneth Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge, 1999); Deborah Cartmell, *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2000); Carol Rutter, *Enter The Body* (London, 2001); Michael Anderegg, *Cinematic Shakespeare* (London, 2004).

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- ²¹ Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Olivier, Welles, Brook and Kurosawa* (Cambridge, 1990).
- ²² John Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society* (Manchester, 1989).
- ²³ Richard Burt and Lynda Boose, Lynda. eds. *Shakespeare the Movie II: Popularising the Plays on Film, Tv, Video and Dvd* (London and New York, 2003).
- ²⁴ Richard Burt, *Unspeakable Shaxxxspeakes: Queer Theory and American Culture* (London, 1998).
- ²⁵ Douglas Lanier, "Shakespeare and Cultural Studies: An Overview", *Shakespeare*, Vol. 2:1, Dec. '06.
- ²⁶ Graham Holderness, *Visual Shakespeares: Essays in Film and Television* (Hatfield, 2002).
- ²⁷ Mark Thornton-Burnett and Ramona Wray, eds. *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke, 2000).
- ²⁸ Kathy Howlett, *Framing Shakespeare on Film* (Ohio, 2000).
- ²⁹ Courtney Lehmann, "The Postnostalgic Renaissance: The 'Place' of Liverpool in Don Boyd's *My Kingdom*," *Screening Shakespeare in the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray (Edinburgh, 2006).
- ³⁰ Graham Holderness, "Shakespeare Rewound", *Shakespeare Survey*, Vol. 45, 1992, p.64.
- ³¹ Tony Howard, "Shakespeare's Cinematic Offshoots," *The Cambridge Companion to Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000).
- ³² Harry Keyishian, "Shakespeare and Movie Genre: the Case of *Hamlet*," *The Cambridge Companion to Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000).
- ³³ Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (London, 1971); Peter Donaldson, *Shakespearean Films/ Shakespearean Directors* (London, 1990); Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare and the Moving Image* (Cambridge, 1999); Kenneth Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge, 1999); Michael Anderegg, *Cinematic Shakespeare* (London, 2004); Amy Scott-Douglas, "Dogme Shakespeare 95: European Cinema, Anti-Hollywood Sentiment and the Bard," *Shakespeare the Movie II: Popularising the Plays on Film, Tv and Dvd*, eds. Richard Burt and Linda Boose (London and New York, 2003).
- ³⁴ Elsie Walker, "Getting Back to Shakespeare: Whose Film is it Anyway?" *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, ed. Diana E. Henderson (Oxford, 2006).
- ³⁵ Christopher Sharrett, ed., *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film* (Washington D.C., 1993).
- ³⁶ Ramona Wray, "Shakespeare on Film in the New Millennium," *Shakespeare*, Vol.3:2, Dec. '07.
- ³⁷ Emma French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood: the Marketing of Filmed Shakespeare Adaptations from 1989 to the new Millennium* (Herts, 2006).
- ³⁸ Wray.

Chapter One: The “Quantum Leap” Approach¹ to Adaptation

1.1 The ‘Art’ of Adaptation: Translating the Bard to the Big Screen

Whether approaching the concept of adaptation from a theoretical or a practical perspective, the problems related to the term and its application continue to proliferate, especially when the waters are clouded by the additional consideration of a source text’s literary status. There remains no clear consensus of opinion as to which of the many categorisations put forward by adaptation theorists – from Geoffrey Wagner to Dudley Andrew, or Michael Klein and Gillian Parker - should be regarded as definitive, leaving us with a range of strategies to adopt as a means of either analysing or creating the resultant adaptation. Theorists James Naremore and Robert Stam prefer to see adaptation as part of an ongoing process of recycling² in which film adaptations are “caught up in a whirl of intertextual reference and transformation,” each text “generating other texts.”³ Their approach refreshingly sidelines the infamous and reductive issue of fidelity to text so often foregrounded in debates surrounding the field of literary adaptation, but such an issue demands some consideration when the text under scrutiny is a work of Shakespearean ‘high art’.

Deborah Cartmell highlights the prejudices surrounding the field of screen adaptations which source literary classics: “film purists” are seen to be as antagonistic towards the adaptation of literary works to screen as those “literature purists” who bemoan the raiding of literary classics by the film industry.⁴ There are those who unashamedly plunder the literary source text, aiming to create carbon copies of the original - and such adaptations are by no means seen as the worst offenders by the literature purist - and there are adapters who draw upon such sources in order to create new works which intertextualise the originary text

yet establish an independent existence of their own within the very different signifying system of film. However, Cartmell points out that the very terminology employed within the field of academic studies (of screen adaptations of literary texts in general and of Shakespeare in particular) continues to privilege the written and the theatrical text: we invariably refer to “Literature on Screen” and “Shakespeare on Screen,” prioritising reference to the literature being adapted or to Shakespeare rather than the cinematic text and thus undermining the worth of the on-screen realisation.⁵

How, then, can the screen adapter hope to overcome such prejudices? Charles Marowitz believes that the only way to combat what he refers to as “the deplorable, anal retentiveness of the canon”⁶ to which Shakespeare and other writers of classic literary texts have been confined, is to adopt a “Quantum Leap Approach”⁷ to adaptation, creating works which radically transpose rather than reproduce the original. Writers like Tom Stoppard and Edward Bond are seen to “intellectually relocate”⁸ Shakespeare’s play texts, revitalising them and opening them up to new creative possibilities. Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* reconfigures the Shakespearean source text, creating new perspectives by reorienting narrative viewpoint and has been translated successfully to both stage and screen (1990). Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless* (1995), a teen Rom-com spin on Jane Austen’s *Emma*, demonstrates the ways in which the adapter can revitalise a literary classic by making it relevant not only to our contemporary social scene but also to genre frameworks in vogue within a contemporary film industry. As a writer who has recently produced an adaptation of *King Lear* I take solace from the success of creative adapters like Stoppard and Heckerling, and from practitioners like Marowitz who urge adapters to resist the “Shakespeare

Establishment” and its attempts to “hold back the flow of new dramatic possibilities.”⁹ Douglas Lanier voices a similar line of thought when discussing the validity of what he terms “Shakespop” adaptations; he claims that “freed from the onus of fidelity to the Shakespeare text, [such] works take up a much wider array of interpretive positions vis-à-vis the Shakespeare works they engage.”¹⁰ In so doing, they encourage a dialogue with their Shakespearean predecessors that returns his work to what Lanier sees as “their place in a long tradition of imitation and adaptation from which their status as literary monuments has tended to isolate them.”¹¹

The ‘conservative’ Shakespearean screen adaptation retains both the narrative structure and the versification of its source text, conforming to expectations of mainstream cinematic language and invariably adopting a lavish costume drama approach in which production values and visual spectacle take precedence over creative interpretation. Its adherence to ‘fidelity’ becomes its guiding - or rather its *misguiding* – light, and ensures its acceptance by a certain type of critic and public that searches for a *definitive* screen version of Shakespeare’s play whilst remaining vociferous in defence of the original work of ‘literature’ and its ‘author’. André Bazin, however, points out that this preoccupation with the ‘author’ and ‘the work’ is a relatively recent development.¹² As such it would have had no validity in Elizabethan and Jacobean times when writers like Shakespeare were adept in the art of ‘borrowing’ the ideas of other ‘authors’; the very notion of a stable ‘work’ by the ‘author’, Shakespeare, would have been alien to thought in this age and ‘borrowing’ seen as an age-old, accepted means of creating. Dudley Andrew cites this as common practice within the history of the arts, noting that the work of Mediaeval painters

featured Biblical iconography in abundance, whilst the creators of miracle plays drew almost exclusively upon Biblical narratives as their source text.¹³

The search for a definitive interpretation of Shakespeare's play text, whether on stage or screen, is a counter-productive exercise which limits the creative integrity of the adapter and the director. Stam points out that "the idea of a single, definitive, faithful adaptation does not hold sway in other media" and in the theatre in particular, where "conceptual reinterpretation and performative innovation" are not only regarded as the norm but are prized above more lacklustre, conservative renditions."¹⁴ Why then, must the screen writer who creates a free adaptation have to justify her decision to engage in such "performative innovation" simply because that performance takes place on screen rather than on stage? Russell Jackson argues that the relationship between filmed Shakespeare and academia will always remain "tense," but suggests there is an emerging "academic disinclination to celebrate harmonies and resolutions" produced by a mainstream cinema which generates an image of Shakespeare as "figurehead of conservative Anglocentric culture"; instead a "sympathy for the determinedly avant garde" and a "distrust of the cultural politics of mass entertainment films as powerful generators of false consciousness" is on the rise.¹⁵ The adapter seeking to write a screenplay destined for an art house audience can find solace in Jackson's words; however, for the adapter whose aim is to produce a script which establishes its mainstream appeal *without* recourse to the kind of hegemonic view of Shakespeare as conservative, Anglocentric figurehead so readily found in heritage screen adaptations of the Branagh variety, the way forward remains problematic.

Yet, historically, Shakespeare's plays have constantly been amended and interpreted to suit the mood of contemporary production. Nahum Tate's 1680 version of *King Lear* became the accepted version of 'Shakespeare's' play for over a century, despite the liberties taken with the text's story line and thematic preoccupations: the morally ambiguous elements of the text were eliminated, tragi-comic moments were cut and a romantic liaison between Cordelia and Edgar was inserted to ensure restoration of order, resulting in a long series of productions which - in addition to omitting central characters like the Fool and radically altering the narrative outcomes - had no qualms about operating outside what is often ambiguously termed the 'spirit' of the source text. Film and theatre critic Allardyce Nicoll, writing back in the thirties, notes that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were fully aware that "their created work, once paid for by the management, ceased to be their property, might be used in any way that that management saw fit and was not likely to view the light of day in printed form."¹⁶

In the current cultural climate, given Shakespeare's iconic status, we are far more 'precious' about Shakespeare's 'work' than either his contemporaries or the actors and managers who staged his plays in the years prior to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries would ever have been. Working conditions for the playwright in Shakespeare's era, according to Nicoll, held much in common with the working practices of the film industry: the "'stars ruled the boards'" and "'considerations of art'"¹⁷ fell outside the remit of the writer then as now. And like Nahum Tate, the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights exploited texts freely, often in search of "the sensational, the trivially novel and the vicious"¹⁸ (in what may now be deemed true Hollywood style), much to the outrage of outspoken opponents of the theatre who, argues Nicoll, have a great deal in common with the

twentieth century - and by inference twenty-first century - opponents of film.¹⁹

Lanier claims that what we have *inherited* is a “reinvented Shakespeare” whose image has been manipulated to create the acceptable face of “a national poet of Britain,”²⁰ a relatively *safe*, repackaged Shakespeare, promoted as a national commodity and cultural icon. As a consequence, we have surely lost sight of Shakespeare, the working playwright.

Michael Anderegg’s astute identification of two types of Shakespearean film adaptation succinctly polarises the two potential ends of the spectrum a writer may choose to align herself with. Those “made from the centre” are seen to combine Shakespeare’s cultural authority with “institutional support” of a commercial nature (major studio), governmental nature (Kozintsev’s *Gamlet* (1964) and *Korol Lir*, 1970) or both (Olivier’s *Henry V*, 1944).²¹ Actor-directors like Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh provide this type of “official Shakespeare” which propagates a certain kind of “Britishness” and as such links Shakespeare to matters of national identity.²² Conversely, there are “marginal films” which serve to challenge Shakespeare’s cultural supremacy. Anderegg cites Welles’ films as examples of these marginal adaptations which do not share the same tone of respectability.²³ I would also see writer-directors like Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman and Gus Van Sant as sharing a similar position, even though the work of all three differs considerably in terms of style and engagement with Shakespeare’s language. Peter Brook’s adaptation of *King Lear* (1970) is accepted as part of the canon of Shakespeare on screen, yet it seems to be a film made ‘at the margins’ rather than ‘from the centre’, even though it appropriates Shakespeare’s language and, like Olivier and Branagh, Brook is undeniably a part of the theatrical fraternity as are many of his film cast. His screen adaptation entails no sense of

national identity, of 'Britishness', and presents a fragmentary take on the narrative, employing low budget strategies that stand in opposition to the high production values of many adaptations of filmed Shakespeare. But what fails to fit neatly into Anderegg's definition is the genre film which, though made 'from the centre' in a studio sense, works "at the margins"; films like *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) and *She's The Man* (2006), both co-written by Karen McCullah Lutz (with, respectively, Kirsten Smith and Ewan Leslie), appropriate Shakespeare's narrative template yet irreverently play with its identity, challenging Shakespeare's cultural supremacy just as those 'marginal films' cited by Anderegg are seen to do.

Russell Jackson claims that, in contrast to film-makers working prior to the 1930s, film industry marketing strategists of today tend to skirt the issue of the cultural status afforded by the film's affiliations with Shakespeare, establishing its identity instead via its principal actors, and foregrounding the lavish scale of production as its main selling points.²⁴ Similarly, Emma French highlights a growing "post-modern irreverence" in the treatment of screen Shakespeare, and traces its evolution from being a mere off-shoot of the heritage film genre to becoming "a genre with recognized sub genres of its own, including the teen Shakespeare film and the Branagh Shakespeare movie;" she ascribes the shift to "the necessity of marketing filmed Shakespeare adaptations as both a discrete entity and, paradoxically, as a medium that transgresses genre," and concludes that successful marketing of screen Shakespeare involves the "blur[ring]" of "binaries" between "British heritage" packaging and the popular Hollywood film.²⁵ Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*, for example, with its stellar cast and extravagant period costume treatment fulfils its 'Hollywood' remit and yet is also

constantly referred to in its marketing material as the only ‘uncut’ screen version of Shakespeare’s tragedy with a running time of 242 minutes. *She’s The Man*, the latest film offering of recycled Shakespeare, comes from the Hollywood studio DreamWorks, and with a budget of \$20,000,000, it is clearly a film targeted at a mainstream audience. Yet its affiliations with its Shakespearean source text are drawn upon in a marketing sense, its teen-speak tagline providing a prologue-like overview of the plot of *Twelfth Night*:

Everybody has a secret... Duke wants Olivia who likes
Sebastian who is really Viola whose brother is dating
Monique so she hates Olivia who's with Duke to make
Sebastian jealous who is really Viola who's crushing
on Duke who thinks she's a guy...²⁶

Its predecessor, *10 Things I Hate About You*, is similarly irreverent in its treatment of the source text, employing marketing strategies which play with Shakespeare’s verse to create such taglines as “How do I loathe thee? Let me count the ways”, and “Romeo, Oh Romeo, get out of my face”, neither of which relate to *The Taming of the Shrew* yet serve to make the lay person’s connection with the Bard and with the film’s Rom-Com genre template.

Clearly, there are screen adaptations which reject Shakespeare’s language and yet retain a tangible connection with his text, and there are those which radically shift the boundaries of accepted interpretation even as they retain the language. However, to speak of maintaining or rejecting the ‘spirit’ of a source text - a preoccupation of many Shakespearean critics past and present, and of actor-directors like Olivier and Branagh - is at best redundant and at worst reductive. It assumes the presence of an extractable ‘essence’, a transferable

semantic core with a *single* meaning, but as theorists like Stam point out, such a position smacks of the kind of “essentialist arguments” espoused by dated fidelity theories, theories blatantly undermined by, for example, reception theory which suggests that there is no stable nucleus of meaning within a text, unless we accept what is ultimately the ‘reading’ given to us by critical consensus.²⁷ Whether or not we place our faith in such theories, in a fragmented, post-structuralist age we can no more hold on to notions of authorial *integrity* or authorial *intent* than Shakespeare and his contemporaries could: writers thrive on the ‘borrowings’ of others.

Adapters’ choices are not governed solely by the *kind* of adaptation embarked upon. When adapting the works of Shakespeare, a high culture icon of global magnitude, consideration as to how the language and the resultant imagery are to be conveyed on screen becomes of paramount importance. Whether Shakespeare’s verse is to be retained or abandoned, in part or wholesale, is dependent upon more than issues of fidelity due to the revered position Shakespeare’s language is afforded within Western culture. We automatically seem to require a justification for its exclusion and at the very least seek its representation in *some* form that is suited to the visual and aural properties of the medium of film. His verse embodies more than spoken interaction, serving as it does to relate all that is inferred and yet unseen on what was the relatively abstract space of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage and it is this which makes adaptation of Shakespeare’s works singularly problematic. Peter Brook acknowledges that the issue of “shift[ing] gears, styles and conventions as lightly and deftly on screen as within the mental processes reflected in Elizabethan blank verse onto the screen of the mind”²⁸ presents tremendous challenges for the screen adapter.

Coupled with this is his concern that the freedoms afforded by Shakespeare's contemporary stage and its "non-localized" performance space cannot be replicated in the more realist, photographic medium of film, the image systems of the latter being too concrete to convey the multi-layered meanings inherent in Shakespeare's verse. Like Brook, Anderegg argues against the notion that Shakespeare's plays are automatically 'cinematic' simply because they move so frequently between time and space.²⁹ Brook's contention that the literalness of film works in opposition to the metaphorical nature of Shakespeare's verse is also echoed by Neil Sinyard who claims that Shakespeare does not approach text in the manner of the screenwriter.³⁰ "How", Brook asks, "can the screen free itself of its own inconsistencies so as to reflect the mobility of thought that blank verse demands?"³¹

Given that Brook also directs his adaptations, it is hardly surprising to find that he resolves many of these tensions during the production stages in which his editing and cinematography become as eloquent as Shakespeare's verse. But for the adapter who is unable to retain creative control at the production stage - as is the norm for most screenplay writers - the problem cannot be resolved in this way. Yet screen writer Robert McKee argues that it is the writer who is responsible for the inception of a film's image system: whilst it is the directors and designers who finish it, "it is the writer who first envisions the ground of all imagery, the story's physical and social world."³² He urges writers to "write for the eye," and never to write a line of dialogue when a visual expression can be created instead since the balance of image to sound in film should be, in his estimation, 80/20 respectively.³³ But this immediately signals problems for the writer adapting Shakespeare's works to the screen. How do we physically represent the multi-layered images

inherited from the source text when working in a medium characterised by its leanings towards photographic realism? How dare we edit or totally rewrite some of the most cherished and eloquent lines of dialogue spoken by Shakespeare's protagonists when there are bound to be viewers who lovingly anticipate their inclusion?

The adapter of a Shakespeare text seems duty bound to replicate in some way the existing image systems of the source text without resorting to 'realist' or 'photographic' representation. To be literal, to be too concrete, is to lack sophistication: film may be a predominantly visual medium but it is capable of creating equally subtle image systems if written into the script from the outset. According to McKee, a film's "poetics" must be handled with "virtual invisibility" – it must be an "unconsciously recognised" part of the film's "subliminal communication" system if it is to increase the "depth and complexity of aesthetic emotion."³⁴ His disdain for what he terms the "declamatory symbolism" of films like *The Piano* speaks volumes: the screen writer must avoid this kind of heavy-handed symbolism since, he argues, it becomes merely a "neutral, intellectual curiosity" created to "flatter the elite audience" rather than becoming an intrinsic part of the film's diegesis.³⁵ Perhaps this is one of the reasons why I find it difficult to view Grigori Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* as a successful work of cinematic 'high art': Kozintsev's image system smacks of the kind of 'declamatory symbolism' McKee warns writers against adopting and insults the intelligence of its audience, whereas the nihilistic image system adopted by Peter Brook in his film adaptation of the same play becomes an intrinsic part of the film world he creates, not only through the visuals but through the cinematography, the editing and the sound.

Lanier has faith in film's capacity to attain "a visual sophistication that rivals Shakespeare's semantic density."³⁶ However, he also ponders the question of the "cultural authority" posed by retention of Shakespeare's language, asking whether its function is to "mythologize pop icons" or to "lend Shakespeare's poetry a hip currency."³⁷ Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996) serves as a ready example for the would-be adapter of a Shakespearean screen adaptation that could function in either respect, but it also serves to demonstrate the way in which the verbal dexterity of Shakespeare's verse does not translate comfortably to an MTV pop culture style which relies so heavily upon visual dexterity instead. The often fast-paced delivery of the lines and the frenetic editing techniques disrupt the natural rhythms of Shakespeare's verse and Luhrmann's use of 'declamatory symbolism', in the form of iconography associated with the media and Christianity, saturate the screen to the point that we pay little heed to the language anyway. Coupled with this is Luhrmann's inclusion of a soundtrack which consists of a range of popular songs already in the public domain and thus redolent with generic associations; what we end up with is a soundtrack pastiche incorporating contemporary romantic ballads, seventies disco, surfer hip-hop and the score from spaghetti westerns as a means to convey the narrative to a pop literate rather than a Shakespeare literate teen audience. The film itself may be a great success but the rationale behind its appropriation of Shakespeare's language remains questionable. Even when a writer has successfully imbibed the screenplay with a subtle, subliminal image system consisting of visual and aural motifs of the quality of Brook's *King Lear*, there remains this issue of the spoken word.

It is difficult to see dialogue as the *last* step in the writing of a film adaptation when the starting point is a play, dependent as the latter medium is upon dialogue, and yet this is seen as a prerequisite in screen writing terms.³⁸ In his closing address at the British Shakespeare Association Conference in 2005,³⁹ Sam West, the newly appointed director of Sheffield's Crucible Theatre, bemoaned the death of the spoken word and urged Shakespeare practitioners and scholars alike to return to close examination of Shakespeare's language as the way forward. McKee, as screenwriter rather than theatre practitioner, makes the contestable claim that dialogue – and thus the 'word' – is *always* secondary to the power of the visual in film and should form the last step in the process of writing a screenplay. Furthermore, long speeches are considered "antithetical with the aesthetics of cinema"⁴⁰ and whilst the playwright, working within the conventions of staged performance can employ 'poetic dialogue', to do so on screen works against the realist leanings of the medium: we do not speak in blank verse even though its patterns echo the rhythms of our speech.

If this is so, how then should adapters of Shakespeare to screen proceed, especially when dealing with a play like *King Lear* where the philosophical nature of the words spoken do more than propel the narrative or develop character? When pressed upon this issue McKee's advice was to avoid adaptation of Shakespeare's plays to screen unless using the narrative purely as inspiration, since any attempt to create a 'faithful' version could only result in what he terms a "canned Shakespeare" that still smacks of bringing the bard to the masses.⁴¹ Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* serves to illustrate his point: freed from the constraints of Shakespeare's language, Kurosawa is able to resituate elements of the *Lear* narrative into the jidai-geki genre, melding Shakespeare's Western tragedy with

Eastern folklore to create a film which, whilst it takes its inspiration from Shakespeare's play, is intellectually relocated within a decidedly Japanese aesthetic far removed from the realms of 'canned Shakespeare'. The proliferation of adaptations of Shakespeare to screen in the silent era of cinema, although born in part of a desire to lend cultural weight to this new medium, suggests that the power of the narratives – as Shakespeare would surely concede since he too chose to appropriate them from the works of others - is as important as the language. Shakespeare's narratives follow a classical design and lend themselves to cinematic expression in a way that his language does not.

Why then do so many adapters persist in their pursuit of a screened Shakespeare which employs Elizabethan verse whether in an Elizabethan/Jacobean or a modern context? Contrary to McKee's claims, there are films in which dialogue is the mainstay of the narrative and there are screen adaptations which present a version of Shakespeare's plays that still manage to employ his verse in meaningful ways, surmounting the insurmountable and offering intelligent contemporary readings of the narrative. In his screen version of *Hamlet* (2000), Michael Almereyda successfully utilises the media technology appropriate to the film world he creates as a means of seamlessly resituating the soliloquy in ways that work cinematically. *Hamlet* without the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy is almost unthinkable and yet how does the screenwriter deal with such a staged convention as the soliloquy? Almereyda's treatment of this crucial soliloquy illustrates the possibilities opened up by a new medium: rather than allowing it to constrain his creativity, he ensures that it is embedded within the image system which forms part of the film's diegesis. Unlike Luhrmann, Almereyda creates an image system which imbibes the media technology central

to the corporate world he envisions; consequently, he is able to exploit the technology, firstly by relaying Hamlet's suicidal thoughts via the video diary entries he plays and replays throughout the narrative and secondly through the more conventional route of the voice-over. By demonstrating Hamlet's morbid preoccupation with thoughts of death within the confessional intimacy of the video diary, Almereyda ensures the plausibility of Hamlet's return to such thoughts as he walks down the aisles of his local video store, surrounded as he is by the out of focus images of action heroes which operate at a subliminal level, providing the kind of sophisticated subtext all screenwriters should aim to employ. Almereyda manages to use the visual conventions of cinema to illustrate key soliloquies whilst retaining their relevance to his film's modern context and to the underlying mood of his protagonist. His adaptation demonstrates the ways in which the visual image can augment rather than usurp Shakespeare's verse if handled masterfully. Furthermore, Almereyda's film text is augmented by a background white noise, creating a constant edginess and discomfort to the sound quality and again complementing rather than competing with its techno-saturated image system. It is, therefore, not a foregone conclusion that Shakespeare's plays can only succeed on screen if the problematic of transposing his verse is dealt with by its outright dismissal.

However, the problem of how to convey on screen the kind of interior soliloquies designed for delivery from the apron of a stage in a moment of intimacy with a live audience remains a major issue for adapters. The voice-over can allow us access to a character's thoughts whilst visibly conveying actions of a very different nature, leading to what Russell Jackson terms a "collision between the spoken word and the shown image,"⁴² which may create effective moments of

dramatic irony even if they are devoid of the intimacy afforded by direct audience address in a staged performance. Yet there are moments when the voice-over soliloquy simply fails to connect in a plausible manner: the voice-over soliloquy employed by Roman Polanski for the delivery of Macbeth's infamous "Is this a dagger" speech lacks the theatrical tension which should accompany such a moment of internal self-doubt when visually realised on screen by the cartoon-like image of the dagger itself. Do we really need both? To replicate the staged soliloquy by a direct audience address to camera is also problematic: it creates a "radical disruption"⁴³ of the film's diegesis and as such must be used sparingly if working within the conventions of mainstream cinema. Yet in his counter-cinematic version of *King Lear* Brook repeatedly utilises direct address to camera as a form of audience alienation not only for the soliloquy but for delivery of key lines, ensuring the viewer's constant awareness of the film as an intellectual construct.

Brook's refusal to manipulate his audience via the emotive properties of musical score underlines his desire to retain a distance between viewer and protagonist as does his inclusion of the silences which surround the spoken word, investing the language with greater intellectual weight and portent since it serves as the main communicator of meaning. But whilst Brechtian alienation devices and an emphasis upon the spoken word may work successfully in an art house production, such techniques are not an option for the writer aiming for a mainstream audience whose expectation of the medium will involve both the employment of visual and aural signifiers to decode meaning, and an emotional engagement with the narrative's protagonists on some level. The silences employed in the more mainstream *Ran* may be a reflection of the theatrical

practices of Noh theatrical conventions but in this instance they are also indicative of the audio conventions of the western genre, just as Kurosawa's use of such extended silences punctuated with a highly dramatic musical score during the battle sequences are indicative of the audio conventions of the epic. Similarly, Kozintsev's use of the highly emotive Shostakovich score throughout his *Korol Lir* invests the film with elements of the melodrama as well as the epic, and although it is a film which has been appropriated by Western academia as a 'classic' rendition of the Lear narrative – and is thus, one assumes, considered to belong to 'high culture' rather than 'popular culture' – as a writer/director operating within the parameters of Soviet Social Realist Cinema, his work was surely *intended* for a wider audience. Certainly, Kozintsev seems to shift the narrative emphasis from the plight of the individual to that of the masses through his cinematic preoccupation with the landscape which surrounds the royal castles and the peasants who inhabit it, suggesting its close affiliations with the road movie.

Similar issues arise when dealing with decisions about edits and insertions. In line with the conventions of mainstream cinema, most writers acknowledge the necessity to edit Shakespeare's text considerably bringing it into line with the expected time-span of screened viewing experience as opposed to staged viewing experience, though Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) proves an exception to this unspoken 'rule'. Olivier, for example, chooses to focus on a Freudian reading of *Hamlet* (1948), reconstructing the narrative along the lines of personal/familial drama and ousting its political elements whilst Brook's *King Lear*, with its nihilistic emphasis, presents us with a screened version of the text that downplays the familial and the political in an effort to create a Beckettian sense of the redundancy of existence. Decisions as to the retention or omission of sub-plots,

the inclusion or exclusion of peripheral characters, the insertion or editing of certain lines or scenes will be governed by the writer's interpretative intent. Kozintsev's insertion of a makeshift marriage ceremony between Cordelia and France in his *Korol Lir* (1970) foregrounds his desire to emphasise the redemptive nature of this interpretation, as do the inserted scenes depicting their departure in which Kozintsev loads the *mise en scène* with shots of water, symbolic of rebirth and renewal. The dominance of Shostakovich's highly emotive score also heightens the redemptive nature of this interpretation.

1.2 Screen Adaptations of *King Lear*

Given the problems that beset the would-be adapter of Shakespeare to the screen it seems surprising that there are so many film versions of his plays; and yet his tragedies, which formed twenty-seven percent of production output until 1990, produced one hundred and eighty-four entries for *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* alone.⁴⁴ The contemporary commercial film industry's attempts to redefine Shakespeare as both 'popular' and 'artistic' have, furthermore, resulted in a rash of productions in the 1990s which sought mass market appeal through a reshaping of Shakespeare's plays. The popular genre forms – ranging from costume drama to teen romance to action film – adopted by Shakespearean film-makers in this era form part of an agenda which, according to Lanier, attempts to 'legitimise' the film industry's pursuit of mass market appeal.⁴⁵ Inclusive of genre adaptations, there are an estimated 700 films and TV productions which are indebted to Shakespeare for their origins.⁴⁶

However, despite its contemporary concerns - the dysfunctional family, the failure of patriarchal institutions, humanity's relentless march towards the

apocalypse - there are few versions of *King Lear* from the nineties onwards.

Writing back in the mid eighties, Neil Sinyard notes the play's capacity to "strike a particular chord with twentieth-century sensibilities," its "modernity of style" and "theme," its ability to "speak to the moral chaos and confusion of our time"⁴⁷ lending this Shakespearean work a special affinity with a century in which the horrors of two world wars and potential nuclear apocalypse abound. And yet, from the nineties onwards, we have only three loosely related genre adaptations of the Lear narrative, all of which foreground their genre roots over and above any overt affiliation with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. *The Godfather Part III* (1990) and *My Kingdom* (2001) work within the conventions of the gangster genre whilst Jane Smiley's revisionist version of *King Lear* is realised as melodrama in *A Thousand Acres* (1997), but whilst these films play successfully with the familial and patriarchal failings embodied in the play, *King Lear*'s overarching preoccupation with humanity's relentless journey towards the apocalypse is not, *despite* a plethora of dystopian science fiction films being produced and released around the time of the new millennium.⁴⁸

Perhaps the modern preoccupation with youth and youth culture, especially in the realms of cinema, has much to do with this. Baz Luhrmann's intention to create 'sexy' Shakespeare on celluloid⁴⁹ would hardly have succeeded had he worked with the text of *King Lear*, whose ageing patriarchal protagonist has far less teen appeal than the romantic heroes at the centre of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Simone de Beauvoir remarks that *King Lear* is the "only great work, apart from *Oedipus at Colonus* in which the hero is an old man,"⁵⁰ which may in part explain its absence from the multiplex screen but does little to unravel the mystery as to why there have been so few art house or independent cinema takes on the

narrative. It seems that in order for the subject matter of the *Lear* story line to be acceptable in mainstream terms it too must be resituated into a more familiar mainstream genre package: the western, *Broken Lance* (1954), and further gangster versions pre-dating the nineties such as the noiresque *House of Strangers* (1949), *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974) play with *King Lear*'s narrative template and its archetypes. But as a text it remains resistant to a costume drama rendition along the lines of those found in recent screen adaptations of *Hamlet*. The more mainstream market appeal of Branagh's *Hamlet*, with its high production values and its realisation as a period costume drama, affords it heritage market viability that attains both 'popular' and 'artistic' commercial potential. *King Lear*, on the other hand, is a text that constantly defies heritage definition. Its concerns are universal and timeless, its locale open to a multitude of interpretations, and yet screen writers and film-makers to date seem averse to placing it within the realms of a specifically 'English' costume drama, though its narrative is successfully translated into costume dramas of other nationalities (Kurosawa's *Ran* being a clear illustration of its transference to the Japanese jidai-geki genre) and into mainstream genres which adhere to accepted set and costume conventions such as the aforementioned western or gangster movie.

With the exception of Brook's *King Lear*, those versions which fall outside the mainstream, namely Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* (1987) and Dogme director Kristian Levring's *The King is Alive* (2000), tend to use the text in similar ways, seeking it as inspiration rather than pursuing a close rendition in which Shakespeare's language is retained. Steve Rumbelow's Arts Council funded 'film' version of *King Lear* (1976) does retain Shakespeare's language but, due to

its fractured and radically truncated narrative structure it, like the aforementioned films, sits outside the realms of mainstream cinema. Indeed, there has not been a feature length film version of *King Lear* that employs Shakespeare's language since Brook's apocalyptic *King Lear* at the start of the seventies. Alongside this film, as part of an elite group of films accepted into the canon of 'Shakespeare on screen', we have only two other non-English versions: Grigori Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* (1970) and Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), both of which, unlike Brook's *King Lear*, can be read as genre films with Kozintsev's film employing many of the visual and ideological style motifs of the road movie and Kurosawa's film utilising the visual and aural properties of not only the historical epic but also the western.

These canonical screen versions of *King Lear* may differ in a linguistic sense and in their relationship to genre cinema but all three imbibe a theatricality which seems to validate their acceptance by Western academia. Graham Holderness notes that *certain* academics have been instrumental in what he terms the disconcerting "canonical appropriation" of *certain* screen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays by a select number of auteurist filmmakers.⁵¹ The works of Roger Manvell, Charles Eckert, Jack Jorgens and Anthony Davies are cited as crucial to the establishment of a "particular canon of great films by great directors – Olivier, Welles, Kozintsev, Kurosawa, Brook";⁵² what is established, he argues, is an elitist hierarchy within the field of screened Shakespeare studies, in which "the circle of greatness"⁵³ becomes set by these influential academics to the exclusion of other screen adaptations - especially, it seems, those seen to operate firmly within the realms of genre cinema. Holderness also points out that the auteur-centred approach adopted by such academics assumes, somewhat

arbitrarily, an absolute directorial control of a film's 'vision';⁵⁴ they pay little heed to the collaborative nature of the film industry and its accompanying production constraints. It appears that by focusing on the artistic credibility of the film's creator - highlighting en route their 'theatrical' leanings - these academics are trying to force the inception of a filmic hierarchy in which the film can establish its 'high art' status alongside that of the originary text. But such manipulation fails to take account of other, less auteurist-driven reincarnations of the narratives embedded in Shakespeare's plays, and their very exclusion closes off interesting avenues for both the adapter and the critic. Elsie Walker suggests that critical preoccupation with auteurist readings of screened Shakespeare precludes other discursive possibilities; in seeking to replace the authorial expressivity of Shakespeare with that of the auteur, the debate returns to tired issues of fidelity, the director credited as auteur serving as a cultural "stand-in for Shakespeare."⁵⁵

Brook and Kozintsev are theatre practitioners whose work in the theatre equals or even excels their work on screen, and it is telling that much of the contemporary academic debate surrounding their filmed versions of Shakespeare's plays still revolves around issues related to the theatre and the ways in which these practitioners utilise their theatrical knowledge in construction of their cinematic vision. Similarly, Kurosawa's use of Noh theatrical conventions when working with narratives connected to Shakespeare's plays, lends his films a theatrical edge; it provides "an aristocratic theatrical form"⁵⁶ which once more aligns 'successful' adaptations of Shakespeare to screen with their theatrical roots. Anthony Davies' ruminations, for example, return continually to considerations of a theatrical nature, looking for patterns which suggest that there is a direct correlation between stage and screen, especially in their spatial dimensions and their positioning of the

audience.⁵⁷ Even though Sinyard approaches the study of these texts from a more cinematic standpoint, he too speaks of the “theatrical self-consciousness” of *King Lear* and its capacity to “[draw] attention to its artificiality,” an artificiality that constantly reminds us that we are “in a theatre watching a play”; his contention that the play is one which employs an almost Brechtian alienation⁵⁸ again suggests that adapters may be influenced by their theatrical leanings when formulating ideas as to its cinematic realisation. Brook’s fragmentary treatment of the source text, in which the mechanics of film-making are foregrounded, can in this context be seen as an extension of his theatrical practice rather than a conscious attempt to exploit the very different medium of film. His preoccupation with the spoken word certainly infers a desire to retain the theatrical element of performance and his casting choices are similarly indicative of the theatrical influences at work in his *King Lear*. However, to consider Brook’s film through a theatrical lens is to deny his role as an experimental film-maker of the sixties and early seventies.

Kozintsev’s literary screen adaptations form just part of his extensive filmography and should be considered in the context of his earlier involvement in the Soviet Montage School and in relation to the political affiliations of Soviet Cinema in the early seventies. To view these two writer-directors as first and foremost theatre practitioners is misleading: one has to question the validity and motivation behind such an approach since it attempts to reappropriate these film texts, making them part of Western *theatrical* scholarship when they should be viewed as works of cinematic art of a diverse cultural and national identity, operating within their respective film industries. Whilst consideration of the theatrical elements of Kurosawa’s *Ran* finds a place in scholarly debate about his

film, similar discussion about his use of the conventions of the western genre is noticeably absent. It seems that there is a direct correlation between theatrical pedigree and auteur signature according to those academics instrumental in the creation of the ‘canon’ of screened Shakespeare; but what is sorely lacking from the debate is any in-depth consideration of film industry influences and of the significant role of cinematic genres.

Lanier labels the two models of criticism prevalent up until the eighties as “script-centred” or “film-centred”. The former criticism takes the play text rather than the film text as its starting point and regards a good Shakespearean film as one “that best or most completely ‘realizes’ the Shakespearean script.”⁵⁹ It embodies the elusive and ultimately reductive search for ‘fidelity’ to Shakespeare’s play, whatever that may be. The alternative ‘film-centred’ type of criticism, seeks to “embrace cinematic integrity as its key criterion of value,”⁶⁰ and leads to a discussion of film text and its format as *distinct* from yet, I would argue, still *connected to* the theatrical text it is reappropriating. But this mode of interrogation, along with its ‘script-centred’ predecessor, side-steps crucial issues related to both ideology and the film industry within which these new works must function. Lanier proposes the “ideology-centred” approach in which the *content* and its ideological *intent* forms the focus of discussion as a more desirable form of criticism.⁶¹ Academics like Kathy Howlett, Courtney Lehmann and Mark Thornton Burnett adopt such an approach in their discussions of filmed Shakespeare, offering new ways in which to read the film text – ways that circumvent the more established search for textual parallels, theatrical parallels and the presence of an auteur signature.

However, what is still lacking in current debates about screen adaptations of Shakespeare's work is any real engagement with the *screen* adapter (as opposed to the director) or the adaptation's place within the context of the film industry itself. To consider the film as a reflection of contemporary cinematic trends and the cultural preoccupations of the times also opens up other avenues of discussion. Brook's *King Lear* can be examined not only as a piece of experimental film-making belonging to the counter-cinematic school of expression but also as an example of apocalyptic cinema prevalent in the late sixties and early seventies; Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* can be considered from a genre perspective, employing as it does so many of the thematic and cinematic conventions of the road movie genre, and some interrogation of his involvement in the Soviet Montage school of film-making is a prerequisite to an understanding of his role as film-maker *and* adapter; Kurosawa's *Ran* cannot be fully appreciated without reflection firstly upon its relationship to genre cinema, and secondly without consideration of the relationship between East and West within the film industry. Similarly, cinematic offshoots should be considered within an industry context. Levring and Godard have much to say about both the role of cinema and that of the screen writer: Levring vocalises his 'position' via the declarations which underpin the Dogme new wave manifesto; Godard engages in a much more complex examination of his relationship with the film industry (Hollywood in particular) and the creative process of filmmaking by weaving the whole debate into the fabric of the narrative in his *King Lear*.

Stam argues that the "a priori valorization of historical anteriority and seniority" ensures that the "older arts" are regarded as the "better arts" and it is from this that film derives its inferiority complex, leading to an almost Oedipal

relationship between source text and adaptation in which “film and other visual media seem to threaten the collapse of the symbolic order, the erosion of the powers of literary fathers, patriarchal narrators and consecrated arts.”⁶² Although theatre has a visual dimension, I would argue that when considering the adaptation of a Shakespearean text the same concerns come to the fore since the written text has become a source of literary ‘reading’ as much as a piece in performance. Thus historically, as a piece of theatre, the Shakespearean source text precedes the novel in terms of ‘historical anteriority and seniority’, and film adaptations of *King Lear* are inevitably measured against intractable evaluative criteria entrenched in what Stam terms the “seniority bias.”⁶³

Holderness points out that as late as the eighteenth century, the freely adapted performances of Shakespeare’s plays often bore little resemblance to the stabilised textual versions which had established themselves by the Romantic period.⁶⁴ Shakespeare as text divorced from Shakespeare as theatre had become acceptable, and theatre is now regarded as ‘high’ culture, despite its initial status as entertainment for the masses. However, Shakespeare as *film* is still unable to attain a similarly independent stature, and until this is achieved academics will continue to foreground the hierarchical significance of the text or theatrical productions of Shakespeare’s works over those of film, even though the origins of both stage and screen are firmly rooted in the performance mode. If the adapter is constantly concerned with ways in which the film adaptation measures up to the source text or to previous stage performances, it seems that the adaptation is doomed from the outset, mired in comparisons to Shakespeare’s plays which are freighted both with cultural seniority and superiority. Perhaps, then, the way forward is to embrace the very different medium of film by whole-heartedly

adopting a genre-based approach to Shakespearean film adaptation. The hybrid nature of Shakespeare's plays ensures that they are ripe for multi-generic reworkings and the reshaping of *King Lear* into various mainstream genres already demonstrates its potential to be redefined. Furthermore, by resituating Shakespeare's narratives within the conventions of popular genres, the adapter can draw upon popular cultural *literacy*, provided by the shared models of generic convention at the level of plot expectation and characterisation, ideology, visual, aural and cinematic style.

1.3 *King Lear* and the Sci-Fi Horror Genre

Film theorist Barry Langford regards genre as "an active producer of cultural meanings" which evolves and reconstitutes itself in keeping with the social, cultural, political and economic context of the times,⁶⁵ signalling its chameleon-like properties and its capacity to reflect the contemporary scene. Lear's story is self-perpetuating and continues to emerge within a diverse range of new mythologies, from the male-centred quests of the western and the gangster movie, to the female-oriented narratives of the melodrama. However, it is astonishing to find that none of the screen adaptations to date have exploited to the full the possibility of resituating the astoundingly violent Lear narrative within the horror genre. Kurosawa may employ elements of the genre in his depiction of Kaede as the monstrous *vagina dentata* figure found in horror movies, and his use of dramatic high-pitched strings in the opening moments of the film certainly echo the tensions engineered in the traditional horror movie score, but his film does not venture whole-heartedly into the realms of the horror genre.

Indeed, the horror potential of Shakespeare's plays in general has been neglected with the exception of the horrific to be found in Julie Taymor's *Titus*,

Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*, and in Douglas Hickox's *Theatre of Blood* (1973). The latter significantly places references to *King Lear* at the film's climax, suggesting it is seen as the *most* horrific and violent of all of Shakespeare's plays. Despite its 'camp' elements, Hickox's *Theatre of Blood* is in its own right, according to Steven Schneider, a film that "deserves credit for returning Shakespeare to his low-art roots and exposing him as one of our greatest horror playwrights."⁶⁶ Yet this notion of Shakespeare as 'horror-writer' will undoubtedly be rejected by many Shakespeare scholars. Rothwell claims that "violence as Art invites culture shock,"⁶⁷ and whilst this may be deemed acceptable, for 'artistic' reasons, in the Shakespearean adaptations of 'art house' auteurs like Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman, the violence realised in the mainstream horror genre is less likely to be well received. Cartmell points out that exposure of the violence inherent in Shakespeare's language can be seen to "wound our conception of Shakespeare."⁶⁸ One suspects this would be seen as an inevitable consequence when translating his plays into the mainstream genre of horror or science fiction. However, Cartmell also concedes that, the violent language in *King Lear* "lends itself to violent on-screen expression," though the horrific potential of said language has yet to be realised cinematically.⁶⁹

The horror genre speaks of the postmodern anxieties at the core of our contemporary world and examines these anxieties in a form which appeals to a mass audience. Whilst it remains a highly 'unrespectable' genre, it has attracted much critical debate amongst film academics in recent years.⁷⁰ Noël Carroll claims the horror genre is founded upon the "disturbance of cultural norms"⁷¹, whilst Robin Wood argues that the genre's major concern lies with that which civilization "represses or oppresses," and identifies "repressed sexual energy

within the site of the nuclear family” as the *particular* source of contemporary oppression.⁷² Unlike other mainstream genres the horror genre, according to Barbara Creed, is responsive not only to issues of sexual difference but to the exploration of society’s anxieties, especially about the ‘Other’.⁷³ If we regard ‘Otherness’ as that which is antithetical to dominant culture – a culture which is signified by white, bourgeois patriarchy and which here is represented by Lear - Lear’s daughters may be read as representative of such ‘Otherness’, thus establishing one of many threads which connect Lear’s tragedy with the horror genre at the level of ideology.

If we agree with these critical assertions that the horror genre is ostensibly about patriarchy and the challenges to it then, for the adapter of Shakespeare to screen, there are a wealth of thematic and ideological parallels to be drawn between the major preoccupations of the horror genre and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. There are established links between the genres of horror and tragedy,⁷⁴ and numerous indications within the *Lear* text that its thematic and ideological concerns intertwine the elements of tragedy with those conventionally found in the horror genre. Shakespeare’s construction of Regan and Goneril as the ‘monstrous Other’, and his exploration of the repressed sexual energies at work within patriarchal institutions in general and the family in particular, can be translated to the horror template with ease. Similarly, the play’s examination of the boundaries of sanity and its obsession with identity crises revolving around issues of masculinity provide thematic links to the ideological concerns of the horror genre. Its apocalyptic possibilities and its propensity for violence also suggest its affinity with the horror genre. Langford claims that the genre is an “unstable and unreliable ally to dominant ideology,” which both serves its purpose and voices

the desire to destroy it:⁷⁵ as such, its very instability and nihilistic tendencies make it the most obvious of choices for generic translation of the Lear myth, serving also the play's innate textual instability. *King Lear*'s propensity for gratuitous violence and gore means that there are further parallels between it and the horror genre at an iconographic level: blood, knives, axes, mutations and, to a marked extent here, the mutilation of eyes abound. The putting out of Gloucester's eyes is a scene that seems almost tailor-made for the genre whilst the deaths of Lear and his daughters are full of similarly macabre potential.

I'm also drawn to the postmodern trash aesthetics presented by the melding of such low and high art forms and feel that the genre's very lack of respectability provides greater freedoms for me as an adapter. Adopting a horror genre template allows me to engage in what Dudley Andrew sees as "a dialectic interplay between the aesthetic forms of one period and the cinematic forms of our own period"; the "otherness and distinctiveness" of *King Lear* is refracted rather than presented in my screenplay, offering "an *experience* of the original" as opposed to a *realisation* of the original.⁷⁶ Furthermore, my decision to rework the narrative within the conventions of the horror genre is conditioned by the fact that it is a form of storytelling that is in ascendance unlike, for example, the western. The resurgence of the horror genre in British Cinema, with low budget films such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *My Little Eye* (2002), *Dog Soldiers* (2002), *Deathwatch* (2002), *Creep* (2004), and *The Descent* (2005) performing well at the British box office, suggests that to adopt a horror template within the present cinematic climate may prove wise, especially in light of the current interest in remakes of Eastern horror films – *Ring* (2002), *The Grudge* (2004) *Dark Water* (2005), *Ring II* (2005) - which are drawing global attention to the genre. Torture-porn movies

like *Wolf Creek* (2005), *Saw* (2004), *Saw II* (2005), *Saw III* (2006), *Hostel* (2005) and *Hostel II* (2007) are also in ascendance and there are dramatic horror moments in such films that present very Lear-esque scenes of gratuitous violence and torture.

The science fiction film, like the horror film, has become an established, highly successful commodity in a financial sense from the 1990s onwards, the cinema-going public's interest in the subject matter it explores having become increasingly acute as we have moved into a new millennium. Yet, as with the horror film, critical prejudice prevails against it despite - or perhaps *because of* - its popularity. Its reliance upon special effects is often cited as a negative, capable of detracting from the power of the narrative we are so accustomed to revere in Western society;⁷⁷ when applied to narratives associated with the works of Shakespeare this is particularly pertinent. But to reduce science fiction cinema to the sum of its special effects parts is to deny its value as a vehicle for the exploration of the human psyche and the complex ideologies it so often addresses. Ziauddin Sardar suggests that science fiction cinema, rather than being preoccupied with its 'look' and with scientific matters, is intimately engaged in an exploration of the human interior: the 'science' in science fiction offers instead a "populist dissection of the psyche of Western civilization," its special effects serving as "window dressing, landscape, backdrop."⁷⁸

Beyond the spectacle lies a story and that story reaches back to Western mythology, implying that science fiction cinema - though not necessarily science fiction *literature* - deals in recycled narratives which explore the moral and metaphysical dilemmas posed in epic European literature. The Oedipal echoes within the narratives of science fiction films like *Minority Report* (2002) serve to

illustrate the assertion that what we are experiencing is not only a reworking of mythical narratives but an exploration of the human psyche. When considered from this viewpoint, to resituate the *King Lear* story, with its mythical weight and its probing of the human interior, within a science fiction framework is not as implausible as it may at first appear, especially when coupled with the horror genre which, according to Vivian Sobchack shares with it a capacity to interrogate the patriarchal institution of the family.⁷⁹ The cross-overs between the genres of science fiction and horror, at both a thematic and an ideological level, are already well established; the cross-overs between these cinematic genres and the theatrical genre of tragedy with which we more readily associate *King Lear* are less readily accepted yet equally apparent.

As a genre, science fiction also retains a capacity to reflect the attitudes and fears of the collective psyche at specific moments in time. Historically, science fiction films have served as a socio-cultural barometer, measuring and mirroring the fears and preoccupations of the contemporary society from which they emerge: whilst Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) portrayed a society seduced yet ultimately threatened by the possibilities of technological advancement - echoed and revisited in recent films like the *Terminator* trilogy (1984, 1991, 2003) and *The Matrix* (1999) - the dystopian cinematic visions of the 1950s, exemplified by films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), embodied the anxieties of a generation plagued by the Cold War, the advent of nuclear weaponry and the increasing plausibility of possible alien invasion. Our present-day preoccupation with the threat of global terrorism on a potentially apocalyptic scale is ripe for cinematic exploration and science fiction offers a genre template through which such fears can be examined. Moreover, the nihilistic elements embedded in the

Lear myth ensure its plausible translation to the terrain of a futuristic dystopia. I. Q. Hunter claims that the dystopian visions found in contemporary science fiction cinema reflect our “postmodern loss of faith in narratives of progress;”⁸⁰ already, the screen adaptations of Brook and Kurosawa, back in the seventies and eighties respectively, embrace this ‘loss of faith’ in narrative progress, each envisioning an apocalyptic close to their ‘Lear’ narrative, whilst Godard’s *King Lear* supposedly takes place within a post-apocalyptic world. Placing my screen adaptation firmly within the realms of a futuristic post-apocalyptic dystopia thus presents itself as a natural progression, despite a gap of twenty years during which time the destabilising apocalyptic leanings of the narrative have been sidelined.

1.4 The Role of the Adapter

When posing the question “What is the fine art of adaptation?” screen writer Syd Field answers: “NOT being true to the original.”⁸¹ If only things were that simple. The process of adaptation is complex and inherently problematic, increasingly so when dealing with adaptation of Shakespeare’s works to screen, for how does one measure up to, let alone compete with, the writing credentials of a literary icon? If retaining the language of the source text - a text which is itself ‘borrowed’ from a prior source – how does the adapter create anything bearing the hallmarks of her own individual writing style? Must its individuality only come into being at the production stage once the text is brought to cinematic life via the skills of a director employing a cinematic means of expression? Certainly Brook’s *King Lear* changes significantly from the various shooting scripts written during the filming process, becoming something of far greater potency with the addition of his experimental, counter-cinematic techniques at the production stage. Theatre

productions also evolve and transform to a certain extent under the guidance of different directors but the primacy of the playwright's words remains intact. It is always viewed as ostensibly a play by Arthur Miller or David Hare regardless of directorial interpretation and intervention. Film, on the other hand, is seen as a collaborative process reliant upon collective creative energies. The screenplay writer is rarely given primacy - auteur theorists have ensured the long-lasting primacy of the director above and beyond that of the writer, the cinematographer, the editor and so on - but the writer's role as skilful 'scaffolder' is crucial since the success of the rest of the film text hinges upon creation of a narrative which has momentum, sustainable characterisation and an image system which becomes an intrinsic part of the film's foundations.

The screenplay's emergence as a literary form is, as with its forerunner the play script, an ongoing process. Once considered a 'technical accessory' used *merely* to 'scaffold' the production process, the screenplay continues to evolve. However, despite the of academic Béla Balázs, writing back in the forties, it has yet to be acknowledged as "a literary form worthy of the pen of poets;"⁸² whilst there is a tentative interest in the marketability and literary potential of certain screenplays amongst publishers, publication of the screenplay as an independent text remains the exception rather than the rule. McKee's claim that "the writer is the originator and all others are interpreters of someone else's art form"⁸³ may be loudly contested as an over-estimation of the writer's worth, especially by those who advocate the primacy of the auteur. But what is *less* contestable is the belief that in the world of film and stage, the words from the screenplay or play script assume a different dimension - and often a different form within the cinematic adaptation - once translated to screen and performance space respectively.

Dudley Andrew argues that the adaptation which operates in the “intersecting mode” creates “the *specificity* of the original within the *specificity* of the cinema.”

⁸⁴ By translating the theatrical tragedy of *King Lear* into the sci-fi horror genre, my aim is to retain the ‘distinctiveness’ of the source text whilst exploring its thematic and ideological parallels within a popular contemporary cinematic form. In so doing, I hope to create the kind of ‘dialectical interplay’ Andrew speaks of, the ‘otherness’ of each form being explored as a consequence of their juxtaposition. The conventions of both the horror genre and the science fiction genre provide a structural shorthand, drawing upon popular cultural literacy and allowing an audience unfamiliar with Shakespeare’s play (and his language) access to its narrative thrust and its ideological preoccupations. If, as Emma French asserts, the most successful filmed Shakespeare adaptations are those that “effectively blur traditional binaries between high and low, art and commerce, and British heritage and Hollywood,”⁸⁵ an adaptation which envisages a merging of popular cinema genres and the work of a revered literary icon should prove, at the very least, to be an interesting proposition.

¹ Charles Marowitz, *Recycling Shakespeare* (London, 1991), p.9.

² James Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation* (London, 2000), p.66.

³ Robert Stam, “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation”, *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London, 2000), p.66.

⁴ Deborah Cartmell, “Film as the New Shakespeare and Film on Shakespeare: Reversing the Shakespeare/Film Trajectory”, *Literature Compass*, Volume 3, Issue 5 (London, 2006), p.1152.

⁵ Ibid., p. 1150.

⁶ Marowitz, p.15.

⁷ Ibid., p.9.

⁸ Ibid., p.9.

⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁰ Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2002), p.88.

¹¹ Ibid., p.85.

¹² 13 Andre Bazin, “Adaptation or the Cinema as Digest”, *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London, 2000), p.23.

¹³ Dudley Andrew, “Concepts in Film Theory,” (New York, 1970), *Film and Literature: An Introduction and a Reader*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (New Jersey, 1999), p.264.

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- ¹⁴ Robert Stam, "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation," *Literature and Film: A Guide to Theory and Practice of Film Adaptations*, eds. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford, 2005), p.15.
- ¹⁵ Russell Jackson, "From Play-script to Screenplay", *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000), p.8.
- ¹⁶ Allardyce Nicoll, *Film and Theatre* (London, 1936), pp. 2-3.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p.16.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p.2.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p.7.
- ²⁰ Lanier, p.82.
- ²¹ Michael Anderegg, "Welles/Shakespeare/Film: An Overview," *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London, 2000), p.161.
- ²² Ibid., p.162.
- ²³ Ibid., p.161.
- ²⁴ Jackson, p.8.
- ²⁵ Emma French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood: the Marketing of Filmed Shakespeare Adaptations from 1989 to the New Millennium* (Herts, 2006), p.2.
- ²⁶ <http://www.imdb.com>, 12/11/06.
- ²⁷ Stam, p.15.
- ²⁸ Peter Brook quoted in Geoffrey Reeves, "Finding Shakespeare on Film: an Interview with Peter Brook," first published in *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11, No.1, Fall, 1966, *Focus on Shakespeare Films*, ed. Charles W. Eckert (New Jersey, 1972), p.38.
- ²⁹ Anderegg in Naremore, p.157.
- ³⁰ Neil Sinyard, *Filming Literature: the Art of Screen Adaptation* (London, 1986), p.3.
- ³¹ Brook quoted in Eckert, p. 41.
- ³² Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (London,1999), p.408.
- ³³ Robert McKee, *Robert McKee Story Seminar* (London, May 20-22nd, 2005).
- ³⁴ Robert McKee, *Story*, pp.401-407.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 408.
- ³⁶ Lanier, p.100.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p.87.
- ³⁸ *McKee Story Seminar*.
- ³⁹ British Shakespeare Association Annual Conference, Newcastle, Sept. 2005.
- ⁴⁰ McKee, *Story*, p.390.
- ⁴¹ *McKee Story Seminar*.
- ⁴² Jackson, p.25.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p.25.
- ⁴⁴ J. Lawrence Guntner, "Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear on Film," *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000) p.117.
- ⁴⁵ Douglas Lanier, "Shakespeare and Cultural Studies: An Overview," *Shakespeare*, Vol.2, Issue 2, December, 2006, pp228-248.
- ⁴⁶ Daniel Rosenthal, "The Bard on Screen," *The Guardian*, Saturday, April 7th, 2007.
- ⁴⁷ Neil Sinyard, *Filming Literature: the Art of Screen Adaptation* (London, 1986), pp.18-19.
- ⁴⁸ *Independence Day* (1996); *The Matrix* (1999); *Minority Report* (2002); *28 Days Later* (2002); *Terminator III: The Rise of the Machines* (2003); *Matrix Reloaded* (2003).
- ⁴⁹ Baz Luhrmann quoted in *Screening Shakespeares: Film Education*, 1997.
- ⁵⁰ Simone De Beauvoir quoted in Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Screen* (Bloomington, 1979), p.235.
- ⁵¹ Graham Holderness, *Visual Shakespeare: Essays in Film and Television* (Herts, 2002), p.70.
- ⁵² Ibid., pp.69-70.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p.69.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p.71.
- ⁵⁵ Elsie Walker, "Getting Back to Shakespeare: Whose Film is it Anyway?" *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, ed. Diana E. Henderson (Oxford, 2006).
- ⁵⁶ Jackson, p.16.
- ⁵⁷ Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Olivier, Welles and Kurosawa* (Cambridge, 1990), pp.143-144.
- ⁵⁸ Sinyard, p.18.
- ⁵⁹ Lanier, *Shakespeare*., pp.228-248.

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- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Stam, pp.4-5.
- ⁶³ Ibid., p.4
- ⁶⁴ Holderness, Introduction, p.x.
- ⁶⁵ Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh, 2005), p.1.
- ⁶⁶ Steven Schneider, "Murder as Art/ The Art of Murder: Aestheticizing Violence in Modern Cinematic Horror," Steven Schneider and Daniel Shaw, eds., *Dark Thoughts: Philosophical Reflections on Cinematic Horror* (Maryland and Oxford, 2003), p.189.
- ⁶⁷ Kenneth Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: a Century of TV on Screen* (Cambridge, 1999), p.155.
- ⁶⁸ Deborah Cartmell, *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen* (Basingstoke and London, 2000), pp.14-15.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., pp.14-15.
- ⁷⁰ Langford, p.160.
- ⁷¹ Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (London, 1990), p.214.
- ⁷² Wood quoted by Barry Keith Grant in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin, 1996), p.4.
- ⁷³ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, 1993), p.152.
- ⁷⁴ Angela Curran, "Aristotelian Reflections on Horror and Tragedy in *An American Werewolf in London* and *Sixth Sense*," *Dark Thoughts: Philosophical Reflections on Cinematic Horror* eds. Steven Schneider and Daniel Shaw (Maryland and Oxford, 2003), p.48.
- ⁷⁵ Langford, p.167.
- ⁷⁶ Dudley Andrew in Corrigan, p.265.
- ⁷⁷ Brookes Landon, "Diegetic or Digital? The Convergence of Science-Fiction Literature and Science-Fiction Film in Hypermedia," *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Film*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London, 1999), p.38.
- ⁷⁸ Ziauddin Sardar, *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*, eds. Ziauddin Sardar and Sean Cubitt (London, 2002), p.1
- ⁷⁹ Vivian Sobchack, "Bringing it all Back Home: Family and Generic Exchange," *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, 1996), p.47.
- ⁸⁰ I.Q. Hunter, "From SF to Sci-fi: Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers*," *Writing and Cinema*, ed. Jonathan Bignell (New York, 1999), p.182.
- ⁸¹ Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York, 1994), p. 216.
- ⁸² Béla Balázs, "'The Script' from *Theory of Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*" (New York, 1970), *Film and Literature: An Introduction and a Reader*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (New Jersey, 1999), p.148.
- ⁸³ McKee, *Story*, p. 9
- ⁸⁴ Dudley Andrew in Corrigan, p.265.
- ⁸⁵ Emma French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood: the Marketing of Filmed Shakespeare Adaptations from 1989 to the new Millennium* (Herts, 2006), p.2.

Chapter Two: *King Lear* and Genre Cinema

2.1 Genre Creativity and Film Adaptations of *King Lear*

Genre-based approaches to the cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's plays have resulted in the production of a multitude of generic films, ranging from those which openly embrace a genre framework to those less readily acknowledged as genre fare. And yet, there remains a critical resistance to genre readings of screen Shakespeare, and an academic disregard for film adaptations which openly identify their genre roots. With the exception of the writings of film academic Neil Sinyard, who approaches Shakespeare from a decidedly cinematic standpoint,¹ and Harry Keyishian's interesting but brief critique of three key productions of *Hamlet* from a genre perspective,² genre-based readings of Shakespearean adaptations remain minimal. Robert Wilson Jnr offers some discussion of Hollywood cinematic off-shoots³ and Tony Howard opens up the debate within a more meaningful ideological framework,⁴ but there is very little critical engagement with the role of what I would deem are primarily genre-based adaptations in relation to *King Lear*.

In reading Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971) as "a fusion of horror film and film noir,"⁵ Sinyard is one of few critics who openly explore the generic properties of 'canonical' Shakespearean screen adaptations. Academic prejudice against the *concept* of genre is, according to Leo Braudy, a consequence of its perceived inability to exude "the uniqueness of the art object," making genre criticism "incompatible with an aesthetic point of view."⁶ Such prejudice is particularly acute when one is examining works by a writer of Shakespeare's iconic status, and offers a rationale as to why genre criticism – with the exception of the heritage/period genre – is not an established mode of engagement with Shakespeare's films

in an academic sense. Yet if, as Braudy states, the work of 'high art' is "defined by its desire to be uncaused and unfamiliar, as much as possible unindebted to any tradition, popular or otherwise,"⁷ Shakespeare's plays fail to qualify as 'high art'. They are hybrids, indebted to tradition, populist in intent, and they engage in the recycling of familiar narratives. Indeed, Shakespeare's creative processes have much more in common with Braudy's definition of "genre creativity" which works through "manipulation of past motifs to create new work."⁸ Keyishian argues that films which are adapted from Shakespeare's plays must be viewed as part of the cinematic tradition that produces them if we are to avoid readings which are constantly freighted with our prior knowledge of the Shakespearean text and its performance 'history'; for only then "can we engage the actual film product before us, rather than our preconceptions, based on our knowledge of the Shakespearean text and its critical and performance traditions."⁹ Adopting a genre approach, intrinsically linked to the genre traditions of cinema, places the emphasis upon production issues of pertinence to the medium, thus avoiding tedious critical debates as to the ways in which the film text measures up to – or fails to measure up to – the Shakespearean source text. Keyishian points out that "when [Shakespeare's] plays are made into movies, Shakespeare adapts to the authority of film more than film adapts to the authority of Shakespeare," concluding that "this is not necessarily a bad thing."¹⁰

Generic classification is also negatively perceived as an imprecise mode of criticism, lacking clearly defined categories. One of the most popular genre forms employed by screen adapters of Shakespeare's plays is the heritage genre which, as a genre, illustrates the inherent imprecisions associated with generic classification. Is it, for example, a period drama or a sub-genre of literary screen

adaptation in which its literary origins are foregrounded and language remains of central importance? Have screen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, as French suggests, evolved from the status of off-shoot of the heritage film genre to "*become* a genre with recognised sub-genres of its own, including the teen Shakespeare film and the Branagh Shakespeare Movie"?¹¹ Whether or not Shakespeare films exist as a discrete, identifiable genre remains debatable, but what is constantly identifiable across the range of heritage renditions is a nostalgic preoccupation with the past. Susan Bennett argues that such idealizing has "little or no relationship to the realities of the past - or present - values and forms"; instead, it is comprised of "imagined and mythical qualities" and Shakespeare becomes synonymous with "collective nostalgia."¹²

The heritage film's appeal also revolves around its extravagant iconography and its construction of a flawed 'national heritage', preoccupied with the culture and values of a particular class. According to Higson, such preoccupations serve to undermine the social critiques and ironies embedded in the source texts they are adapted from: Merchant Ivory films, particularly those of the eighties and exemplified by adaptations of E. M. Forster's novels, wallow in a visual aesthetic that romanticises the past to the extent that the social criticism at the core of the narrative is subsumed.¹³ The same may be said of heritage adaptations of Shakespeare's works; they *can* become an exercise in visual excess, exploring the experiences of a distanced, privileged class and establishing a flawed construct of national identity founded on a romanticised historical viewpoint. Some of the more inventive cinematic offshoots which adopt a loose connection to Shakespeare's narratives and a close connection to genre cinema, on the other hand, present us with readings which imbibe the ideological concerns

found in the Shakespearean source text in a way that heritage renditions seeking fidelity to Shakespeare's text do not.

Though the theatrical genre of tragedy has no direct genre-specific cinematic equivalent,¹⁴ the heritage genre offers a convenient mode of audience address often exploited in the cinematic realisation of Shakespeare's tragedies. The film adaptations of actor/ directors like Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh can be neatly placed into the category of heritage cinema, alongside the sumptuous costume dramas of directors like Stuart Burge, Franco Zeffirelli, or Oliver Parker. All of the film adaptations of Shakespeare's tragedies created by these directors are convincingly realised within a history-specific context. However, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, with its primordial backdrop and its tenuous relationship with language, does not translate to the heritage genre with the same ease as, for example, *Hamlet* or *Othello*.

There are no cinematic adaptations of the *King Lear* text in which the language is retained *and* a period costume drama approach is adopted – no visual excess, no A-list star casting, nothing identifiable within a specific historical era. Instead, film adaptations of *King Lear* operate outside the boundaries of heritage cinema, manipulating the narrative to create entirely new works from a range of genres which are neither confined by the class definitions associated with heritage cinema nor by that genre's propensity to overwhelm the ideological concerns of the text under a weight of lavish production values. It could be argued that Kurosawa's *Ran* operates within the realms of the costume drama since it belongs to the historically specific jidai-geki genre, but Kurosawa plays with this genre, imbuing it with subversive elements more readily associated with the western, the epic and the horror genres of Western cinema, and employing the minimalist

stylistic motifs of Japanese art and Noh theatre rather than those of heritage cinema. Kurosawa's work showcases the ways in which, through 'manipulation of past motifs' - ranging here from samurai codes to Noh theatrical conventions, Eastern legends to the Ur texts of Western culture, – *genre* creativity can result in the construction of works of 'high art'. His work also highlights the ways in which generic cross-over enriches film text: the very imprecision of genre as a concept or a system of classification becomes a positive rather than a negative force, demonstrating genre's capacity to adapt, to merge in response to a whole range of external forces at work within the contemporary production climate.

Harriet Hawkins claims that Shakespeare's plays can be successfully updated to suit the mood of contemporary times because their narrative structures lend themselves to "popular forms"; such 'forms' avoid the escapism inherent in heritage adaptations.¹⁵ In its present format *King Lear* is not destined to become the stuff of mainstream multiplex cinema - it is not a story which is likely to appeal to the teen-dominated multiplex audience, dealing as it does primarily in death and old age - and any adaptation which works with the language of the source text is likely to have a more limited appeal for those who associate 'Shakespeare' with the type of 'high culture' force-fed to the masses in our educational institutions. Yet Shakespeare's plays have been adapted for screen since the birth of cinema. His narratives are of a classical design: they revolve around the kind of cause and effect conflicts of all good drama and take the form of a quest, providing narrative momentum and fulfilling expected outcomes. Similarly, genre-based cinema traditionally follows a classical story design with its predictable arch plot engineered to create patterns that fulfil audience expectation. Like classical drama, genre cinema provides a set of expected

conventions, but neither form is rigidly formulaic nor *necessarily* clichéd: instead, genres evolve, reflecting the mood of the contemporary scene and subverting their own codes and conventions for dramatic effect. Historically, the genre of tragedy has evolved from its Greek origins, with its Aristotelean checklist of conventions, into a very different form in modern times, its codes far less rigid, its subject matter far more wide-ranging. But whilst the evolution of the theatrical genre of tragedy has become the subject of much academic debate amongst Shakespeare scholars, the same is not true of debate surrounding the evolution of genre-based readings of Shakespearean film adaptations.

There are a range of genre films which directly employ character constructs and narrative patterns from Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Joseph Mankiewicz's noir influenced *House of Strangers* (1949); Edward Dmytryk's western *Broken Lance* (1954); Francis Ford Coppola's American gangster trilogy, *The Godfather Parts I, II and III* (1972, 1974, 1990); Jocelyn Moorhouse's melodrama *A Thousand Acres* (1997); and Don Boyd's British gangster film *My Kingdom* (2001) form part of a long tradition of genre reinventions of *King Lear*. With the exception of Moorhouse's film, these genre-based adaptations of the play present us with an essentially male-centred quest, revolving first and foremost around the Everyman figure of Lear and operating within a macho, male-dominated society, but though the *Lear* narrative translates with particular ease to a western or a gangster genre template, it also lends itself to a diametrically opposed realisation as female-centred melodrama. Whilst films like *Broken Lance* and *House of Strangers* flaunt their genre identity, 'canonical' versions of the Lear story are invariably identified as 'art house' products, a label seen to confer 'high art' status on a par with that of the Shakespearean source text.

However contestable the validity of such a term may be, what is most disconcerting here is the refusal to acknowledge the mainstream generic leanings of certain 'canonised' film versions. Both *Korol Lir* (1970) and *Ran* (1985) emerge as genre products, employing the conventions of the road movie and the western/epic respectively in terms of cinematic style, archetypal characterisation and narrative patterning. Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* adopts a classical design, focusing on the redemptive elements of the narrative and constructing an aged 'Everyman' Lear whose quest takes him on a journey of self-discovery. The narrative deals in linear time, presents a consistent reality and leads us to a closed ending. Kurosawa's *Ran* may work through subversion of the genres being employed and we are led to an ambiguous, apocalyptic ending, but the film's narrative patterning still mirrors the classical design in terms of its linear treatment of time, causality and the creation of a consistent reality, and it is Hidetora's 'quest' that shapes the narrative's momentum. Both *Korol Lir* and *Ran* exploit elements of mainstream genre conventions to creative effect in order to relate their tale; and it is their inherent, if unacknowledged, association with the road movie and western/ epic respectively which ensures their mainstream accessibility despite their status as foreign language films within the English-speaking market place.

There are also a number of recent films which, though displaying no *direct* reference to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, bear striking resemblances to some of the pressing themes and ideologies at work in the play. They rework the Lear myth in ways relevant to a contemporary audience, suggesting that its preoccupations are of significance to today's cultural scene. David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), adapted by Jim Uhls from Chuck Palahnuik's novel, incorporates elements from a range of popular genres: it is viewed intermittently as science fiction,

psychological thriller, an action or a crime film. But what remains a constant at the core of *Fight Club*'s narrative is a nihilistic obsession with self-destruction and self-loathing akin to that explored in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. We witness the struggle to maintain masculine codes in the face of what is seen as the feminisation of masculinity; and the male fear of castration, which is part of the subtext of *King Lear*, is realised on screen through the film's misogynistic treatment of Marla who - representative of the kind of demonised womanhood realised via Regan and Goneril in *King Lear* - is seen to be the root cause of Jack's problems: like Lear's daughters, "She ruined everything". The very first self-help group attended by the protagonist is for men suffering from testicular cancer, offering a blackly humorous take on the castration theory¹⁶ and, as with Shakespeare's play script, it continues to present us with dark and discomfiting moments which evoke nervous laughter in much the same way as Gloucester's macabre fall from a non-existent cliff is engineered to do. The disintegration of identity is closely linked to the disintegration of patriarchy in both narratives, and the exploration of contemporary manhood, whether in Elizabethan England or late twentieth century America, produces a dark and extremely violent struggle. Tyler Durden claims that "self-destruction is the answer" and in giving away his power Lear, like Durden, activates a subconscious desire to self-destruct. Uhls - consciously or subconsciously - merges a number of genres and establishes the script's intertextual affiliations with Shakespeare's *King Lear* at the level of theme and ideology. This film, unlike the more direct heritage renditions of screen Shakespeare in general, imbibes the social critiques at the core of Shakespeare's *King Lear* without overwhelming them in outmoded issues related to national heritage or displays of sumptuous visual excess. Uhls demonstrates the ways in

which genre creativity can lead to the production of works which connect with iconic literature at an intertextual level, whilst still functioning effectively in today's genre-fuelled film industry. The same may be claimed for *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance*: both films are regarded as cinematic offshoots of *King Lear* despite their very different cinematic realisation. Adapted from prose source texts rather than from Shakespeare's play script, and reconfigured as western and gangster film respectively, they mirror Shakespeare's *King Lear* at a thematic and a structural level, demonstrating how elements of the mythical Lear narrative resonate throughout film and literature, resurfacing in a number of guises at various moments in our literary and cinematic history, in response not only to contemporary cultural and political issues but also to respective industry-related climates of production.

2.2 Adopting a Genre Framework

Film genre is, according to theorist Thomas Schatz, "essentially a narrative system" consisting of fundamental structural components. We identify such fundamentals as plot, character, setting, thematics and style with film genre in its broadest sense. However, Schatz makes a clear distinction between *film genre* and *genre film*. He argues that "whereas the genre exists as a sort of tacit 'contract' between filmmakers and audience, the *genre film* is an actual *event* that honours such a contract."¹⁷ For example, if we discuss the western genre we are discussing the "systematic conventions which identify western films," rather than a single western film or all westerns. Film genre is seen by Schatz as:

both a *static* and a *dynamic* system. On the one hand, it is
a familiar formula of interrelated narrative and cinematic

components that serves to continually re-examine some basic cultural conflict. On the other hand, changes in cultural attitudes, new influential genre films, the economics of the industry and so forth, continually refine any film genre.

As such, its nature is continually evolving.¹⁸

Schatz seems to be suggesting that a film's genre is not simply defined or confined by its *static* structural conventions; instead it is intrinsically linked to the *dynamics* of its time of production and to a whole host of outside influences, from industry issues and cinematic trends, to contemporary cultural issues, and the influences of other films or film-makers both past and present. When critiquing film adaptations of *King Lear* it is essential to read each film from this dual perspective, tempering static formulaic considerations by close reference to the more dynamic exterior influences at work within the text and the genre it employs. If we view *film genre* as "a specific grammar or system of rules of expression and construction"¹⁹ which evolves in response to prevailing cultural/cinematic trends and production issues, and the individual *film* adaptations of *King Lear* as "manifestations" of these rules and influences, then we are able to examine both the static and the dynamic properties of genre-based interpretations of the source text.

As well as identifying the static and dynamic nature of film genre, Schatz outlines two types of genre with distinct ideologies and structural frameworks.²⁰ Screen adaptations of *King Lear* can be categorised into one of these two classification systems. If Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* is read as a pseudo road movie, and Moorhouse's *A Thousand Acres* as a melodrama then each film can be examined in relation to what Schatz terms the "genre of indeterminate space", or

“integration”.²¹ Such a ‘space’ is characterised by its ideological stability: it operates within a “civilized ideologically stable milieu which depends less upon a heavily coded place than on a highly conventionalized value system ” in which the dramatic conflict revolves around the protagonist’s struggle to align- or realign- his views with those of the community at large.²² Lear’s journey of redemption is central to the Shakespearean source text and translates to the ideological template of the genre of indeterminate space with ease: issues of a territorial nature are central to the play’s narrative momentum - Lear’s relinquishment of his lands sets the story into motion - but it is the inner turmoil Lear faces as he journeys psychologically towards redemption that forms the ideological core of the narrative. The final ‘battle’ in *King Lear* revolves not around the struggle to re-establish order and territorial boundaries but around Lear’s re-assimilation into the ‘civilized’ community, realised via his final reunion with Cordelia. The progression from “romantic antagonism” to “eventual embrace” is identified as central to the genre of indeterminate space.²³ Lear’s relationship with Cordelia can be defined as one of ‘romantic antagonism’, their reunion the ‘embrace’ that signals his return to the communal fold.

Although Shakespeare’s *King Lear* can be seen as ‘tailor-made’ for cinematic realisation as a genre film which operates within the parameters of ‘indeterminate space’, there are few screen adaptations of the play which adopt this mode of address, leaving many opportunities for the would-be adapter to mine this relatively untended field. Yet there are numerous screen adaptations which employ the *Lear* narrative, albeit loosely, within the very different genre framework of “determinate space”. Whilst the genre of indeterminate space presents an “ideologically stable setting,” the genre of determinate space is

defined as an “ideologically contested space.”²⁴ In westerns like *Broken Lance*, and gangster films like *My Kingdom* or *The Godfather Trilogy*, the “symbolic arena of action” is all important as the setting becomes what Schatz terms “the cultural realm in which fundamental values are in a state of sustained conflict.”²⁵

Unlike the road movie or the melodrama, there is no reliance upon a conventionalized value system - we are dealing with mobster morality and frontier values rather than a recognised or widely accepted morality such as Christianity— and the struggle remains territorial rather than overtly psychological, the ‘hero’ remaining isolated and on the edges of the community rather than being re-assimilated at the narrative’s close. Shakespeare’s play may work successfully as a template for film genres which operate in an ‘indeterminate space’ but it also translates successfully to the opposite cinematic framework, suggesting that the source text may be read in many ways, and more importantly that the adapter, when given creative licence, can shape the source text into a whole host of creative possibilities.

¹ Neil Sinyard, *Filming Literature: the Art of Screen Adaptation* (London, 1986).

² Harry Keyishian, “Shakespeare and the Genre Movie: The Case of *Hamlet*,” *The Cambridge Guide to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000).

³ Robert F. Willson Jr., *Shakespeare in Hollywood: 1929-1956* (New Jersey, 2000), pp. 115-122.

⁴ Tony Howard, “Shakespeare’s Cinematic Offshoots,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000).

⁵ Sinyard, p.15.

⁶ Leo Braudy, *Film Theory and Criticism* (Sixth Edition), eds. Leo Braudy and Martin Cohen (Oxford, 2004), p.657.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.658.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.660.

⁹ Keyishian, p.73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.81

¹¹ Emma French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood: the Marketing of Filmed Shakespeare Adaptations from 1989 to the New Millennium* (Herts, 2006), p.2.

¹² Susan Bennett quoted in *Framing Shakespeare on Film*, Kathy Howlett (Ohio, 2000), p.8.

¹³ Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford, 1995), p.109.

¹⁴ Braudy, p.657.

¹⁵ Harriet Hawkins, *Classics and Trash: Traditions and Taboos in High Literature and Popular Modern Genres* (London, 1990), p.123.

¹⁶ Ivan Ward, *Castration: Ideas in Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, 2003).

¹⁷ Thomas Schatz, "Hollywood Genres: Film Genre and the Genre Film," *Film Theory and Criticism* (Sixth Edition), Eds. Leo Braudy and Martin Cohen (Oxford, 2004), p.691.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.691.

¹⁹ Ibid.,p.693.

²⁰ ibid., p.695.

²¹ Ibid., pp.697-698

²² Ibid., p.698.

²³ Ibid., p.698.

²⁴ Ibid.,pp.697-698.

²⁵ Ibid.,pp.697-698

2.3 Grigori Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* (1970)

2.3 (i) On the Road

Korol Lir (1970) is the final film from Kozintsev's extensive filmography. Whilst his adaptation of *King Lear* consciously moves away from the heritage screen versions of Shakespeare's works favoured by numerous directors at the film's time of production,¹ his treatment still offers a traditional rendition of the *Lear* tale, presenting us with definitive constructs of good and evil, and a tragic hero who learns to correct his tragic flaw as the familiar, redemptive narrative unfolds. It conforms to expectations of accepted film grammar and presents us with a *Lear* which is accessible to a mainstream audience, even in its sub-titled format. Like the other literary screen adaptations undertaken by Kozintsev in his final years,² it is devoid of the experimental elements embodied in his pioneering work as a member of the Soviet Montage school of film-making and is accepted as part of the 'canon' of Shakespeare on screen.³ However, it has much more in common with genre cinema and with the socialist ideologies which underpin Soviet cinema of this era than with the kind of art house status conferred upon it as a result of its acceptance into 'the canon'.

Kozintsev's treatment of the Shakespearean source text as more "tragic poem"⁴ than play is reflected in his meticulous attention to the translation of its verse into cinematic images, but it is the *journeying* motif, so central to Kozintsev's image system, that shifts this film from the provenance of art house cinema into the comforting realms of the universal and the generic. And yet current critical debate surrounding the film fails to engage in any discussion of its parallels with the properties of the road movie genre employed so frequently in mainstream cinema, even though the similarities between Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* and road movies produced

in the late Sixties and early Seventies are far more pronounced than any parallels which may be drawn with other Shakespeare on screen adaptations of that era. Kozintsev's depiction of the ordinary "arithmetic of life"⁵ helps to make this film a success but it is its predictable patterning, its striking thematic and ideological parallels with the mainstream road movie and its road movie iconography, whether employed at a conscious or sub-conscious level, that makes it an accessible, well executed piece of genre film-making, tenuously and somewhat self-servingly labelled as art house cinema by academia.

Although a highly regarded theatre practitioner, Kozintsev was also a prolific film-maker who worked in the film industry for over forty-six years, producing twenty films from 1924 to 1970. His involvement in the Soviet Montage school of film-makers of the 1920s is well documented. With their roots in a variety of art forms, such as painting, literature, music and the theatre as well as film, and their intention to reflect the politics and the ideology of a revolutionary Russia, the Soviet film-makers of the 1920s saw the making of films as a social function aligned with the work of the artisan as much as that of the artist.⁶ As co-founder of The Factory of the Eccentric Actor in 1921 Kozintsev established himself as one of the pioneers of Soviet theatre and cinema, and produced a number of highly experimental films in which he emphasised the artificial nature of the *mise-en scène* and the stylised nature of the acting; *The Adventures of Oktyabrina* (1924) and *The Cloak* (1926) with its surreal gigantic teapots, demonstrate Kozintsev's preoccupation with such matters, as does *The New Babylon* (1929), in which experimental camera movements are also employed to convey a sense of confusion via the blurring of the images alongside shots of mannequins and gun-toting women during events leading to the Paris Commune of 1871. At this time, Kozintsev embraced Soviet Montage's disavowal of

conventional ideas of narrative, his films acknowledging his taste for the bizarre and the experimental, but whilst there remain Soviet Montage influences in *Korol Lir*, particularly the shared sense of rhythm and momentum central to montage techniques, there are no signs of his former interest in the kind of openly *avant-garde* leanings of his earliest films.

Since the social function of art in a post-revolutionary Communist Russia was propagandist, and meant to be easily accessible and intelligible to the masses, it is not surprising that the experimental and intellectual films of the Soviet Montage School soon lost favour. Denigrated as both 'formalist' and 'degenerate' the *avant-garde* nature of the movement was eradicated because it worked contrary to official state policy.⁷ In keeping with Marxist ideology, Soviet Montage films of the 1920s do not focus on the individual hero so central to the narrative structure of Hollywood films; instead, it is the masses who are given this narrative function, and in *Korol Lir*, Kozintsev's intentional shift of tragic focus from the individual hero to one which includes the tragedy of Lear's stoic subjects can be seen as an ideological throw-back to the leanings of Soviet Cinema of the 1920s. By the 1930s, under Stalinist rule, we see a return to the hero-led narratives and realist subject matter characteristic of Social Realist Cinema which was to prevail from this time up until the mid-sixties when Russian Cinema, along with the Arts in general, was allowed greater freedom of expression.⁸

Given the confines of such strict government censure, many of the great montage directors like Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov had become inactive by the late 1940s, though Kozintsev continued to work in the cinema, conforming to government censure and the aims of Social Realist Cinema, with sixteen of his twenty films being made from 1924 to 1947. His film-making skills were also employed to

create a collection of propagandist films for the armed forces in 1941.⁹ However, the mid forties saw his return to theatrical productions, Kozintsev venturing back into film only when working with literary adaptations: *Don Kikhot* (1957), *Gamlet* (1964) and *Korol Lir* (1970) mark the end of his film career. Although only traces of the radical film-maker of the twenties remain in the work of this period, his films no longer serving as *agents* of social change, his adaptation of *King Lear* does present us with a sociological take on the narrative, drawing upon the Marxist ideologies that have always informed Kozintsev's thinking. The ideologies underpinning the genre of indeterminate space to which the road movie belongs, with its stress upon the importance of value systems, ultimate social integration and a return to stability, provide fertile ground for such thinking.

Kozintsev's role as theatre practitioner has certainly influenced his film work. The ideas of Gordon Craig in particular have had a marked impact on his approach to both the spatial elements of the frame and the on-screen realisation of Shakespeare's imagery.¹⁰ His adaptations of Shakespeare's tragedies to the screen also benefit from his in-depth understanding of their complexities as evidenced in his publications, *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*¹¹ and *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy*.¹² He is, according to Ronald Hayman, "one of the few directors with a deep feeling for literature."¹³ And yet, despite his seemingly high-brow literary profile, it is Kozintsev's capacity to identify his Lear with the Everyman figure within this narrative that makes his film adaptation of *King Lear* so remarkable. His Lear is "a great king, the dominant personality in his kingdom. But he is also quite ordinary," and it is when Lear "becomes like everyone else" that "his greatness as a tragic figure" begins.¹⁴ It is not, in Kozintsev's hands, a film about heroic grandeur - his casting of the diminutive, softly spoken Yuri Jarvet as Lear speaks volumes here - and

it does not follow traditional expectations of tragedy: our perception of the ‘tragic hero’ is redefined, and it is “the suffering of the whole universe”, of “the whole population of the country” that interests Kozintsev.¹⁵ Furthermore, in foregrounding Lear’s redemptive journeying towards a better understanding of his subjects, Kozintsev’s ideological emphasis aligns itself with those of the genre of indeterminate space in which, according to Schatz “conflicts derive not from a struggle over control of an environment but rather from the struggle of the principal characters to bring their own views in line with that of the larger community.”¹⁶ We sense the presence of Kozintsev’s peasants watching and waiting from the edges of the cinematic frame throughout the film as Lear’s ‘journey’ towards communal acceptance propels the narrative onwards; similarly Cordelia, constructed here as the physical embodiment of the value system Lear initially chooses to reject, is seen to be constantly waiting out of shot for his return to the fold.

Kozintsev’s very ‘Russian understanding’ of Shakespeare’s play foregrounds the kind of “Revolutionary Romanticism” noted by politics professor Richard Taylor as part of the Communist utopia¹⁷ - a romanticism fuelled by the desire to further the revolutionary cause, presumably by placing the suffering, tenacious masses at its centre, and “a Realism depicting a reality that audiences would recognise and feel familiar with.”¹⁸ Kozintsev shared with Russian contemporaries like Andrei Tarkovsky a belief in cinema as an art form which must engage with humanity’s spiritual needs; both directors advocated “film-as-art over film-as-commerce,” the function of said art being to illustrate moral and ethical ideals.¹⁹ And yet the elliptical narratology of Tarkovsky films like *Solaris* (1972) with their blasé attitudes towards narrative continuity and clarity and their metaphysical preoccupations, bear no resemblance to Kozintsev’s films of the same era. Tarkovsky’s films remain firmly

ensconced within the realms of art house cinema, offering little that audiences would 'recognise and feel familiar with' unlike the much more accessible work of a director like Kozintsev. Brook's *Lear*, like Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, is an art house offering: it "foregrounds narration (the process of storytelling) as much as narrative (the action itself, assumed to be the focus of attention in the classical film)."²⁰ Kozintsev, conversely, focuses our attention on narrative momentum, adhering to classical film expectations even as he eschews Hollywood's expectations of visual splendour, and in so doing he creates a film which, though widely regarded as 'film-as-art over film-as-commerce', operates within generic storytelling realms, making it a much more accessible transposition of play text to screen.

The sixties and early seventies heralded an uncertain era in Soviet cinema. Directors like Tarkovsky or Aleksandr Alov and Alexander Naumov attracted state censorship and suppression due to their subversion of "Soviet cinema's glorious past" and an "absence of heroic images of Russian people," in their respective films, *Andrei Rublev* (1966), and *A Nasty Tale* (1965).²¹ However, numerous transgressive films came out of the sixties as Soviet cinema entered a period of relative freedom signalled by the ascendancy of Khrushchev. The output of central studios was minimal and the production levels of republican studios was almost non-existent when Khrushchev came to power in 1953, yet by 1967 state controlled studios like Mosfilm, Gorky and Lenfilm had made in excess of seventy films whilst their republican counterparts had developed fifty-seven feature-length films in a range of genres catering for a mass audience.²² The film industry thrived despite the residual state intervention. *Korol Lir* emerged from the long-established state sponsored production company Lenfilm and was one of twenty-one feature-length films created from 1969-1970 and Kozintsev, unlike such contemporaries as Tarkovsky, Alov and Naumov,

‘toed the party line’, offering an array of ‘heroic’ images of the proletariat in his version of *King Lear*.

His is an ‘understanding’ which produces a strikingly different interpretation of the source text to that realised by Peter Brook, despite the fact that both directors are working during the same period and both are consciously trying to avoid the kind of Hollywood-friendly heritage style of adaptation. Kozintsev claims it is “shameful to sugar *Lear* with beautiful effects,” and speaks of the “poverty of epic films with lavish costumes”; he seeks, instead, “a style of costume which would not attract attention, customs which [are] not remarkable in any way. There should be nothing to admire.”²³ His casting also reflects a desire not to engage in the kind of visual titillation associated with the Hollywood mainstream. Goneril and Regan are to be seen as “obscene heartless old women” whose “horrifying common-placeness” dispels any sexually gratifying edge to their lascivious natures. Theirs is not a “sophisticated, intellectual sexuality”²⁴ of the kind which would contribute to a box-office success. However, whilst neither of them adhere to the heritage treatment of Shakespeare on screen, Brook’s apocalyptic *Lear* stands in ideological opposition to Kozintsev’s story of redemption and rebirth, and each director’s on-screen realisation of the narrative is totally different in terms of cinematic style. With the limited exception of the storm scene, the radical experimentation one might expect of a pioneer of Soviet Montage is not in evidence in Kozintsev’s version whereas Brook’s *King Lear* is characterised by its use of challenging counter cinematic techniques, placing it beyond the realms of the Hollywood mainstream.

Examining Kozintsev’s *Korol Lir* within a genre framework opens up new avenues of discourse for the film scholar and the Shakespeare scholar alike. As a conceptual prism, genre offers us a kind of language system with a set of predictable

patterns and conventions capable of shaping experiences into a pleasurable and dependable whole for the audience. When we talk of the play *King Lear* as a tragedy we immediately make assumptions about its narrative structure, its dominant themes, its character types, its tone and the potential style of its telling; and when we categorise films into particular genres we apply a similar set of assumptions. Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* remains a tragedy but, as previously noted, at an ideological and a thematic level it is also a fine example of the road movie genre characterised by its ideological stability and its dependence upon a highly conventionalized value system. Dramatic conflict within this genre revolves around the protagonist's struggle to align - or realign - his views with those of the community at large rather than upon the kind of territorial conflicts which shape narrative momentum in adaptations favouring gangster or western genre readings of Shakespeare's play. Lear's journey of redemption, purposely exorcised from the latter type of adaptation, is central to the Shakespearean source text and translates to the ideological template of the road movie with ease: territorial matters may provide the play's narrative momentum but it is the psychological turmoil Lear faces as he strives for his own redemption that forms its ideological core *and* that of Kozintsev's adaptation.

Korol Lir is also a pseudo road movie in terms of its iconography and its visual style. The film is shot in 70mm Sovscope, a Russian version of the wide screen format associated with the road movie genre, giving an on-screen image which is twice as wide and twice as tall as standard film stock. Kozintsev's choice here is conditioned by his desire to move away from a depiction of Lear within the insular walls of his castles, ultimately placing him outside the fortifications, amongst his people; but it is also due to his desire to realise Shakespeare's text "not only as a dialogue but as a landscape."²⁵ Nature is given a specific role, "like the chorus of a

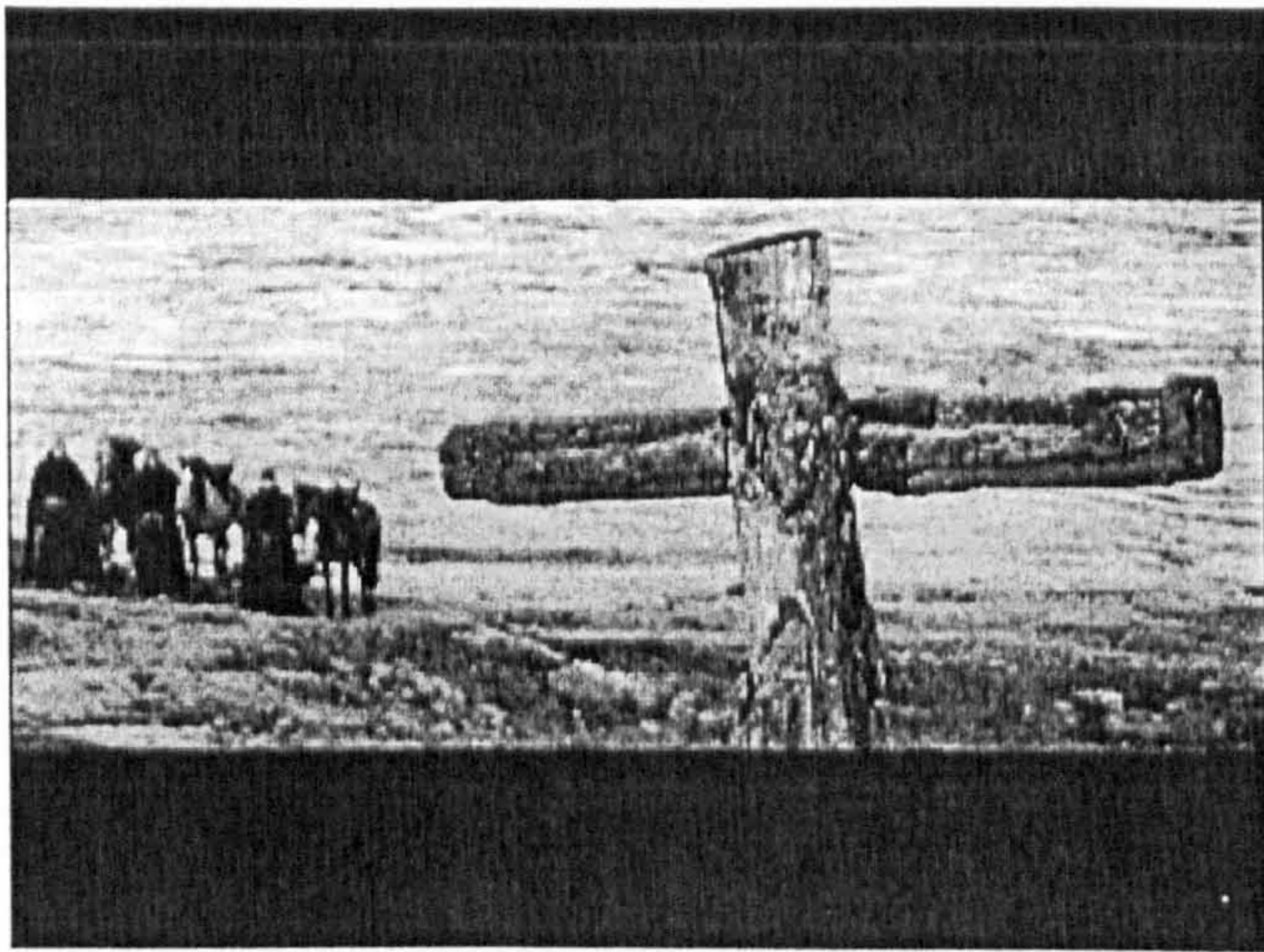
Greek tragedy,”²⁶ and the landscape is frequently privileged within the frame, suggesting its brooding presence at the core of the narrative as is often the case in road movies, whether said landscape is operating as the kind of malign force found in John Ford and Nunnally Johnson’s film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) or as a more ambivalent force in a film like *Easy Rider* (1969).

The all important establishing shots, accounting for around five minutes of dialogue-free screen time, focus upon the landscape as Lear’s people journey on foot or by makeshift transportation over this barren yet densely populated terrain, emphasising for us the significance of journeying in the film. These opening moments of the film foreground the iconography it shares with road movies of the period with its lingering shots of landscape, roads and modes of transportation. As we witness Lear’s subjects journeying along the road to his castle for this royal occasion, the recurring shot of shuffling rag-bound feet traversing the rudimentary highway underlines the sense of perpetual motion which characterises Kozintsev’s treatment of the text. Echoes of Ford’s award-winning road movie take on Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which the Joad family represent the dispossessed in microcosm as they and their fellow workers traverse the dustbowls of a Depression-ravaged America, resonate throughout Kozintsev’s *Korol Lir*. We move from shots of shuffling feet to the cart that carries a child, to horses ridden by soldiers, and as the narrative unfolds the camera continues to focus on images of people in motion, the mode of transportation, whether foot or horse, carriage or bier, being placed centrally within the frame.

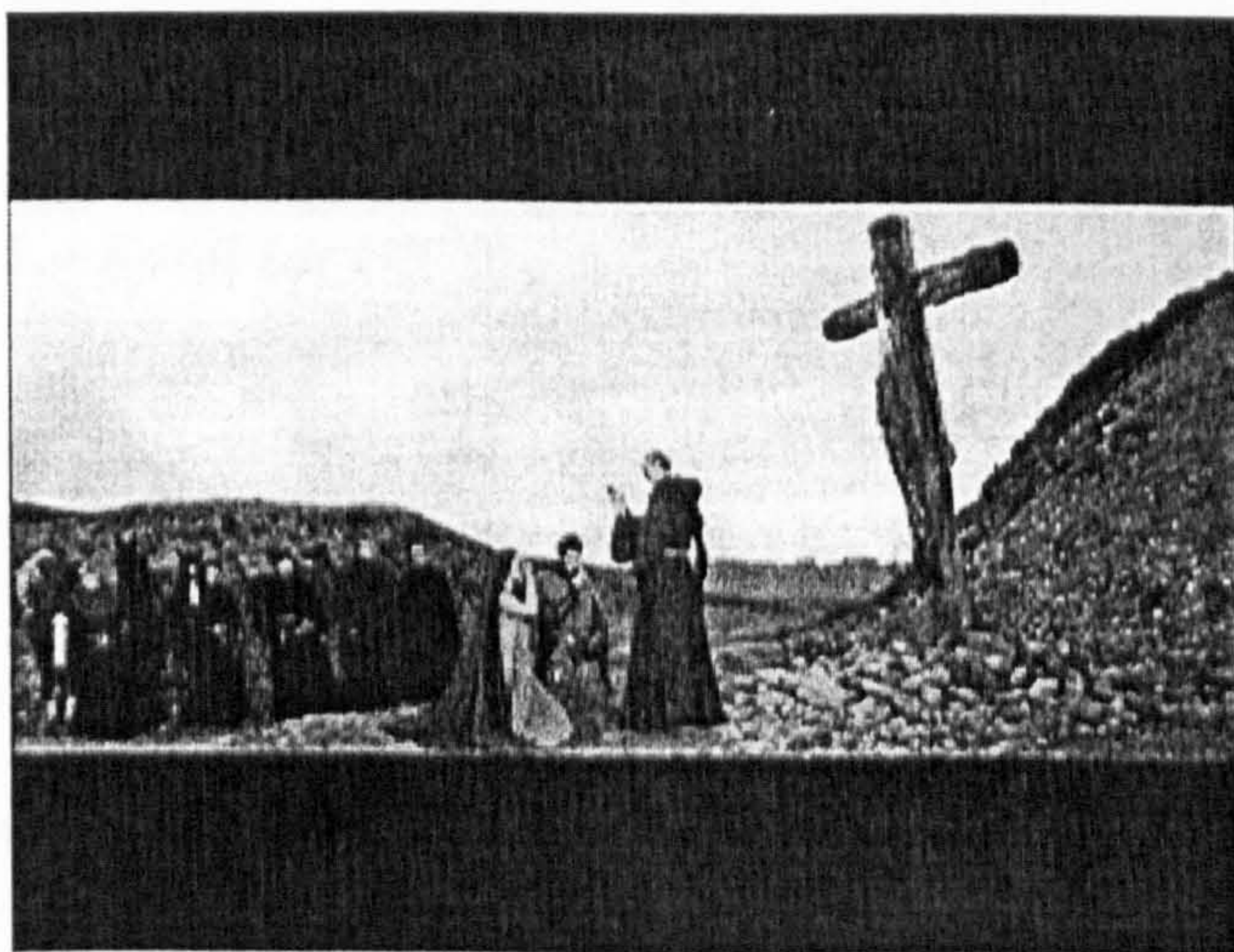
It also shares with road movies a recurring use of wide angle shots of open vistas with roads stretching on beyond the edges of the frame in a style reminiscent of road movies of the period from *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) to *Easy Rider*, to *Butch*

Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1967). Kozintsev continues to engineer landscape scenes in which we witness the perpetual motion of Lear and his subjects. We see Lear and his entourage as they journey relentlessly from castle to castle; we view Cordelia's journey into exile, Edgar's wanderings with itinerant beggars, Gloucester and the mad Lear meandering through the wilderness. These patterns of perpetual motion, again bearing acute similarity to Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, provide the "visual generalisations" which for Kozintsev "grow into a movement", giving "shape and dimension" to the sequence of the shots,²⁷ inferring once more that the journeying motif which dominates the road movie genre is central to his image system. The marriage of Cordelia on screen "not in a church, but on the road"²⁸ once more signifies the iconic importance of the road and the journeying motif within this film. Furthermore, the camera employs a predominance of the wide angle tracking shots characteristic of the road movie as Lear moves from castle to castle and as his people gather not only in the opening moments but as bands of wandering exiles forced into motion by the onslaught of a civil war during the course of the narrative. Speaking at UNESCO HQ in Paris in 1964, Kozintsev claimed that the essence of film adaptation is to develop aspects of the play which are not as accessible to the stage.²⁹ By employing the visual signifiers and cinematic style associated with the road movie genre, whether at a conscious or a subconscious level, Kozintsev has been able to realise a version of *King Lear* which it would be impossible to create in the theatre given his stress upon landscape and journeying at both a literal and metaphorical level.

Kozintsev's image system is reliant upon the interplay between the conflicting natural elements of fire and water, the former becoming synonymous with evil and barbarism, the latter with virtue and an emerging Christianity. Cordelia is aligned with the natural world; once exiled by Lear, she is always seen in an outdoor setting which invariably incorporates images of running water. As Cordelia kneels before the priest at her make-shift wedding to the King of France, the Christian iconography of the cross which dominates the frame is associated visually with the sea, and the exaggerated diegetic sound of the running water permeates the scene.



2.1 *Korol Lir* (1970)

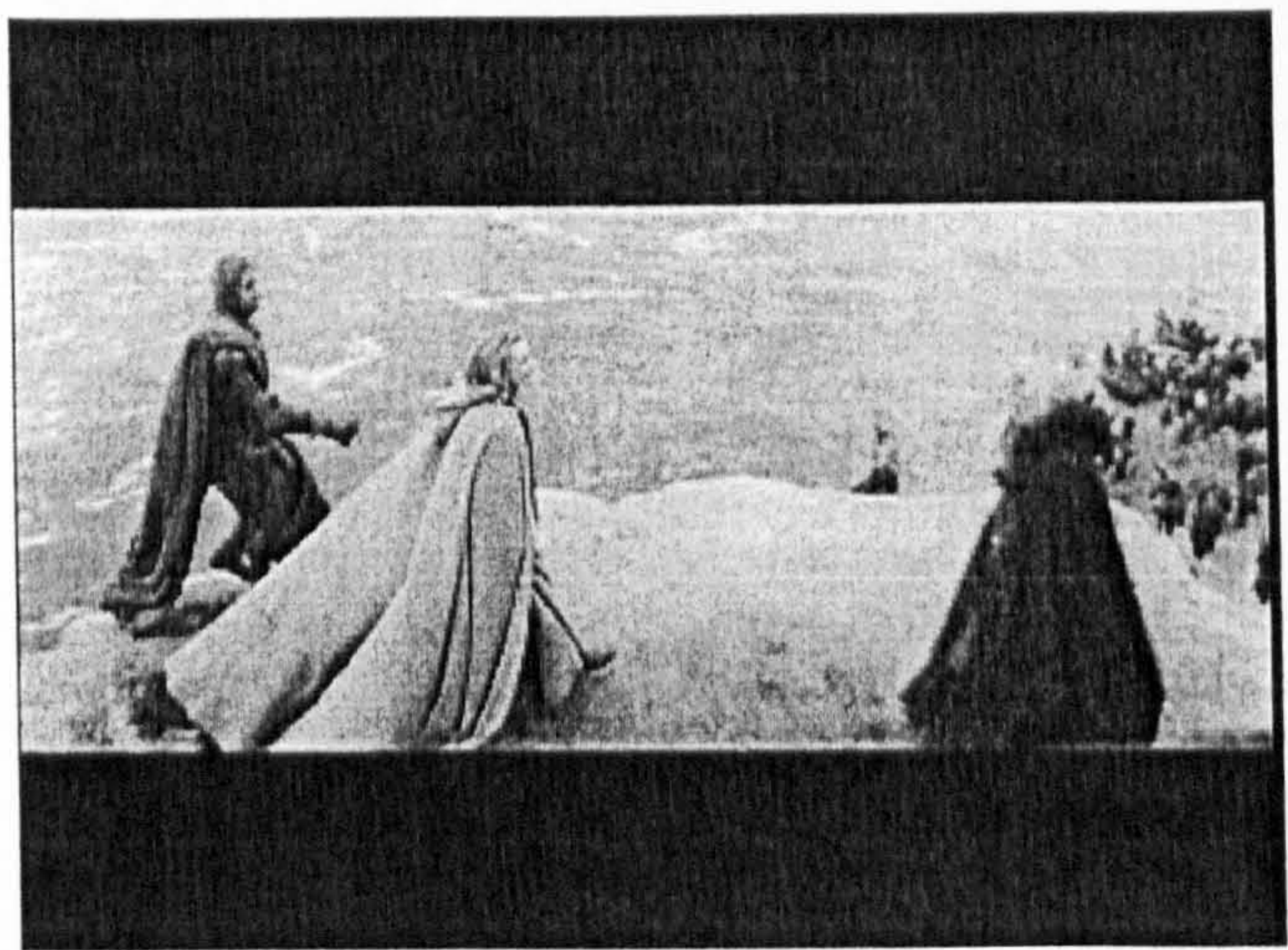


2.2 *Korol Lir* (1970)

Similarly, when she leaves for France, Cordelia wades into the water on horseback, leading the way in what may be construed as a symbolic act of baptism. Her reconciliation with Lear is also framed against the backdrop of the sea.



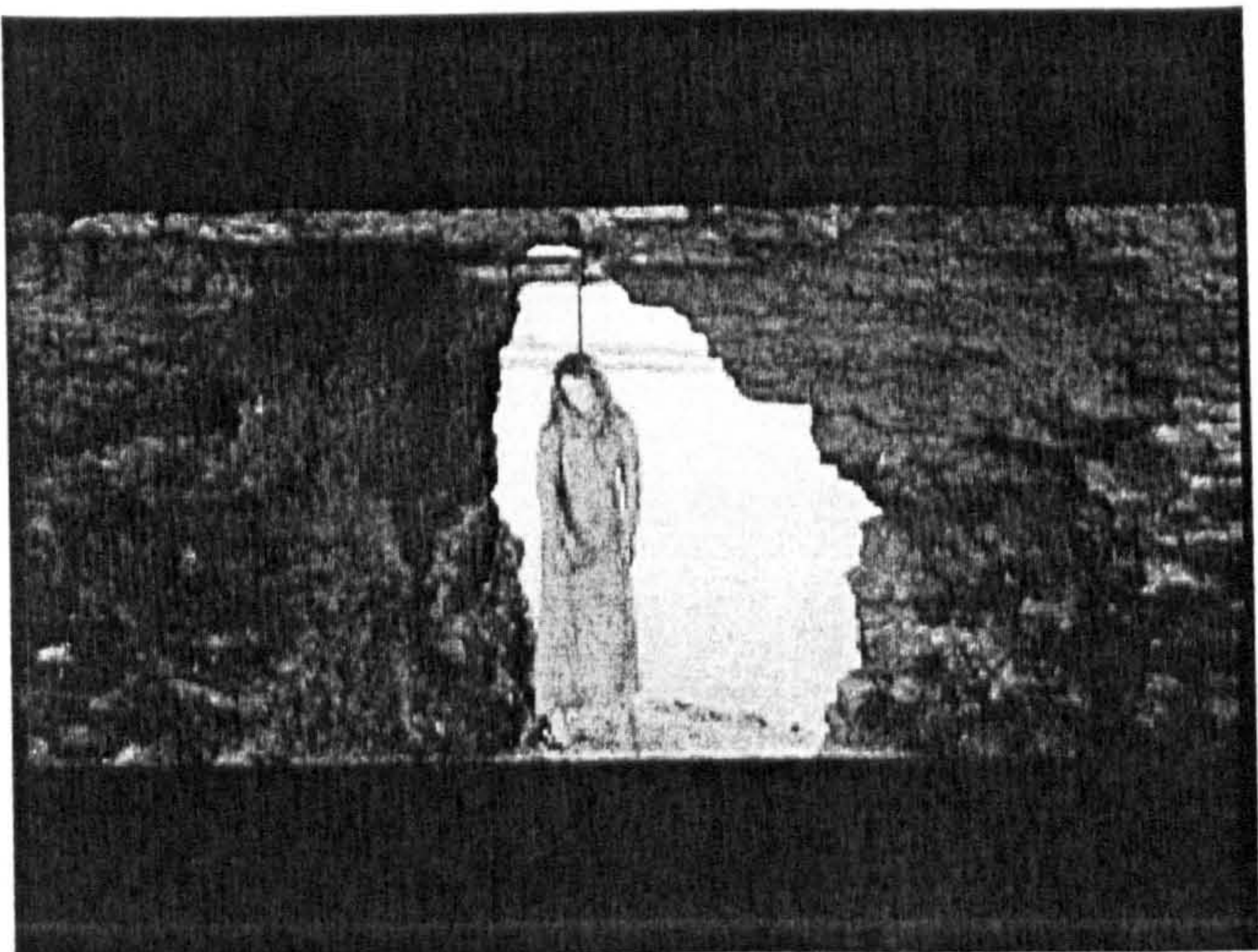
2.3 *Korol Lir* (1970)



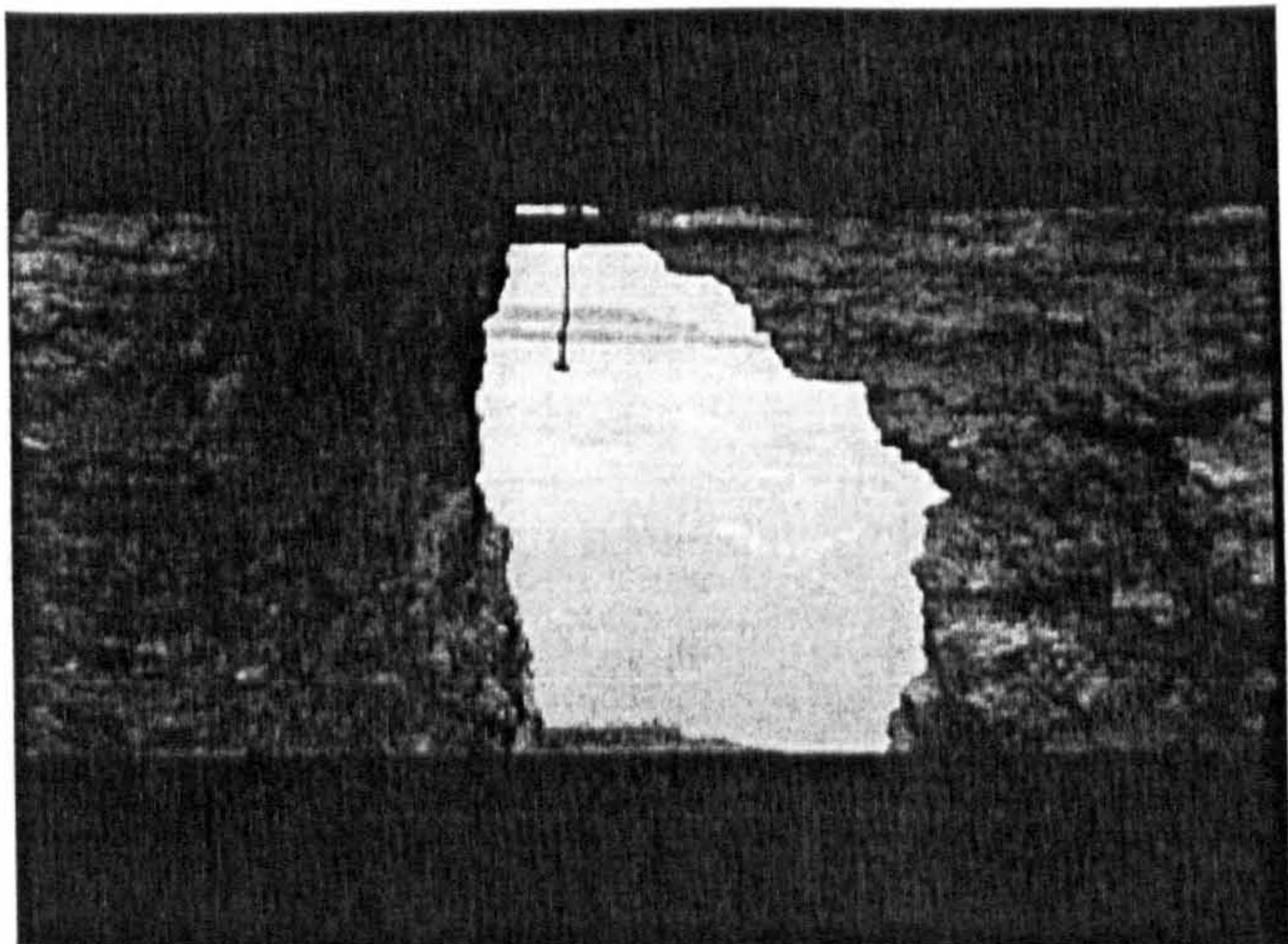
2.4 *Korol Lir* (1970)

The final shot of Cordelia once again underlines her association with water: as we cut to a shot of her hanging inside a cave, the scene is dominated by the sound of waves, and the water in the background provides the symbolic reference to resurrection and rebirth. The horror of the image is displaced further by the closing frame in this sequence. Our gaze rests upon the open water, beyond the site of Cordelia's

suspended corpse, communicating visually Kozintsev’s preoccupation with notions of redemption and reintegration in his version of *King Lear*.

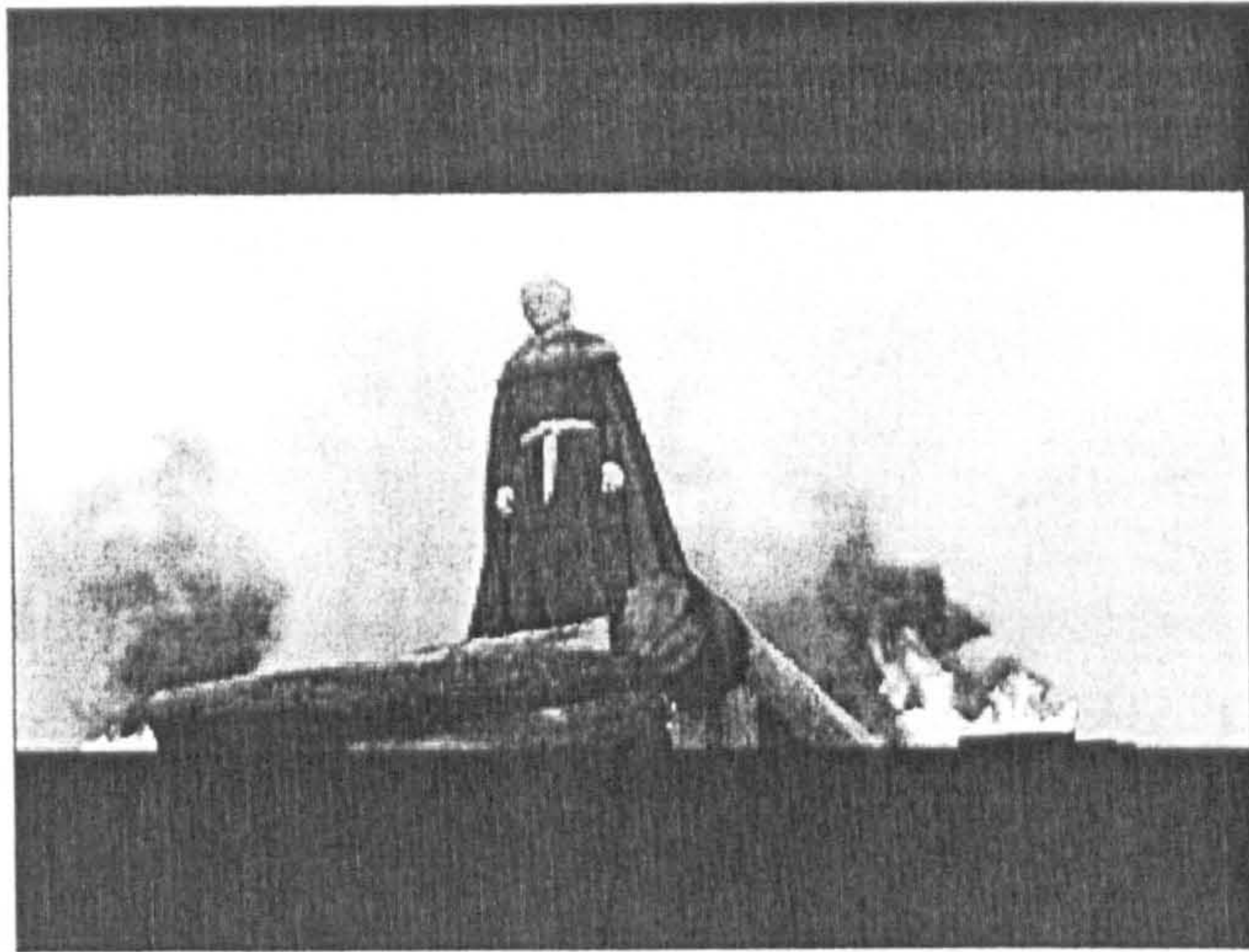


2.5 *Korol Lir* (1970)



2.6 *Korol Lir* (1970)

In contrast to these positive signifiers of rebirth and renewal, Kozintsev continually returns to images of fire, from the seemingly harmless domestic hearth at which Lear is seated in the opening scene to burning torches both inside the castle and on its outer walls.



2.7 Korol Lir (1970)

The film's final image of the blazing battle field flames being doused in water by the stoic peasants is rather heavy-handed but we are left in no doubt as to the very positive and redemptive nature of his interpretation of the source text: good *seemingly* triumphs over evil and patience is rewarded.

Kozintsev's stress upon the redemptive nature of the *Lear* narrative and upon Lear's journey of self-discovery places it firmly alongside earlier road movie narratives as diverse as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), both of which deal with similarly redemptive journeys of self-discovery. The protagonists in all three films set out on a path of reconciliation of some kind, ultimately attained by both physical and spiritual journeying and all of the protagonists internalise their conflict, albeit in the guise of Dorothy's dreamscape in *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy's often nightmarish dreamscape, in which she seeks to break free from family constraints, ultimately leads her to what is packaged 'Hollywood-style' as a universal truth – "There's no place like home" – whilst Kozintsev's Lear journeys into the depths of insanity and despair in order to rediscover a similar sense of well-being afforded by his return to the ideological and, in this instance, decidedly Marxist-Christian fold. In line with the conventions of the

genre of indeterminate space or “integration,”³⁰ Kozintsev’s *Lear* is also constructed as a much more feminised individual, small in stature, emotionally charged and initially placed in a domestic pose sitting by the fireside rather than presiding over his court delivering edicts from his throne. He is a quietly spoken, reflective man; some of his more vicious lines become internalised thoughts or are delivered without the stage audience provided in the source text. When Lear berates Goneril in 1.4: 268 - 275, calling upon nature to “convey sterility” upon her and to “Dry up in her the organs of increase,”³¹ his words are spoken in the form of a soliloquy outside the castle gates with no audience but the elements, transforming the nature of his tirade from cruel attack to an internalised voicing of his dismay, and thus making him a much more endearing character with whose journeying we can at some level identify.

Road movies share structural similarities too since in each we are given a glimpse of what the protagonists’ lives entail prior to the disturbance or conflict which activates their ‘journeying’ and subsequent quest for their own form of redemption. We see what Lear is like as a ruler prior to relinquishment of his territory and his control; we see what Dorothy is like as a petulant child in her home environment. It is also possible to see the structural parallels between *Korol Lir* and its road movie forerunners in terms of the shared *desire* for final reintegration which is central to the thematic patterning of the road movie genre. The climactic point in Kozintsev’s *Lir* does not revolve around the deaths which are so central to the drama in the genre of tragedy; instead, it is Lear’s reconciliation with Cordelia that provides the climax, focusing our attention at a thematic level upon the importance of redemption and a return to the fold, even if only temporarily given that their deaths follow swiftly on from this moment. We move from what Schatz terms the position

of 'romantic antagonism' central to the genre of integration to its predictable final 'embrace', signalling Lear's *spiritual* reintegration in classic road movie style.

However, Kozintsev's *Lear* welcomes the opportunity to withdraw to the confines of a prison cell rather than envisage reintegration into the politically debased society he once ruled and death is the preferred option once Cordelia, the embodiment of 'civilized society', is violently removed. Whilst forties Hollywood films like *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Grapes of Wrath* follow the formulaic route meticulously, with all issues neatly resolved by the end of the journey and the prescribed Hollywood closure in place, *Korol Lir* shares with road movies of the sixties and seventies a twist of genre expectation. Despite Lear's redemption and his reintegration into the Marxist-Christian fold, epitomised by Cordelia and the peasants who remain a waiting force on the edges of the cinematic frame, the film's final moments have more in common with the apocalyptic images of Crisis Cinema than with the kind of cosy reintegration into mainstream society expected of the road movie template. The late sixties saw a rise in films of an apocalyptic nature in both European and American cinema. Films like Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* and Denis Hopper's *Easy Rider* form part of a progressive yet brief period in American cinematic history when film-making became artistically ambitious, and these films' violent apocalyptic non-Hollywood closures share striking similarities with both Brook's rendition of *King Lear* (1971) and Kozintsev's *Korol Lir*: even though each filmmaker adopts a very different approach to film grammar and narration, the films share a final emphasis upon death, futility, emotional bankruptcy. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, presents us with a similarly violent, apocalyptic close, 'buddies' Butch and Sundance, like Kozintsev's *Lear*, choosing death as a preference

to reintegration into the 'civilized society' they have been at odds with, and discovering in the process their own form of freedom or 'romantic embrace'.

Korol Lir follows the narrative pattern established in the Shakespearean source text, but here the subtext is generated by Kozintsev's socialist leanings: Lear rejects his former position of power, aligning himself instead with the values epitomised by a Cordelia who is synonymous with the proletariat beyond the castle walls. Kozintsev does offer closure of some kind but it remains a tentative ending, leading us to ponder the apocalyptic potential of our future. We are invited to believe, as with Edward Bond's *Lear*, that life is ultimately full of redemptive possibilities: the integral use of water imagery symbolic of rebirth and renewal ensures this as do the closing moments of the film in which the stoic peasants douse the flames of war. However, Kozintsev allows his audience the opportunity to interpret the close in a number of ways, dependent upon the viewer's reading of the final shot of Edgar. By cutting his closing lines and having Edgar looking into camera, Kozintsev momentarily forces us to engage with the bigger questions the narrative has posed; the surface skin of the film's diegesis is broken by this direct address to the watcher and we are left to make our own assumptions as to whether Edgar is likely to restore order and if so whether he – or indeed anyone – can prove to be a virtuous ruler. The stress upon the importance of the collective community is yet another predictable pattern within the genre of integration to which the road movie belongs, and it is significant that Kozintsev ensures our continued awareness of the presence of Lear's 'collective community', not only in the opening and the closing moments of his film, but in the inclusion of the cinema audience in the final frame as Edgar invites us to engage in the debate through his direct gaze into the camera's lens. *Korol Lir* may be offering a redemptive, uplifting message in one sense, but it cannot escape the violent

apocalyptic elements embedded in either the source text or, through its intertextual allusions, the apocalyptic road movies prevalent in Western cinema at the time of the film's production.

Along with the construction of an everyman journeying towards knowledge – whether in the guise of a king who must learn to “know [him]self” or a wilful child who must learn the value of ‘family’ and ‘home’ - we also have, in the true spirit of the road movie genre, the conventional ‘buddy’ element within the narrative: just as Butch Cassidy has his Sundance Kid, Lear has his fool whose role is extended both physically and thematically beyond that which he is afforded in the source text. Lear's introduction to the film is filtered through his relationship with the fool, with whom he is at first heard laughing out of frame, and though later images of the Fool led on a lead by one of Lear's soldiers asks us to question the virtue of Lear's investment in this relationship, the intimacy of their alliance is foregrounded on many occasions, notably in the double-act nature of their foreplay in the opening moments and in the comic treatment of Act One, Scene Four as Goneril questions the actions of Lear and his knights. Character constructs in Kozintsev's *Lear* deal in clearly delineated types: the virtue of Cordelia is never in question, even as she seemingly rebels against authority by refusing to conform to Lear's expectations in his ‘love test’, whilst her sisters are set up as the epitome of evil. We are given no insights into the complexities of either Goneril's or Regan's psyche. As an audience we have heroes to cheer for and villains to berate in true Hollywood fashion, and unlike the typical art house film, Kozintsev's exploration of the disintegration of patriarchy at both an institutional and a familial level connects on an emotional plain, engaging the audience not in the dissection of ideologies or the trickery of cinematic techniques but in familiar human dilemmas.

2.3 (ii) The Quest for Redemption: an illustrative analysis of the opening moments

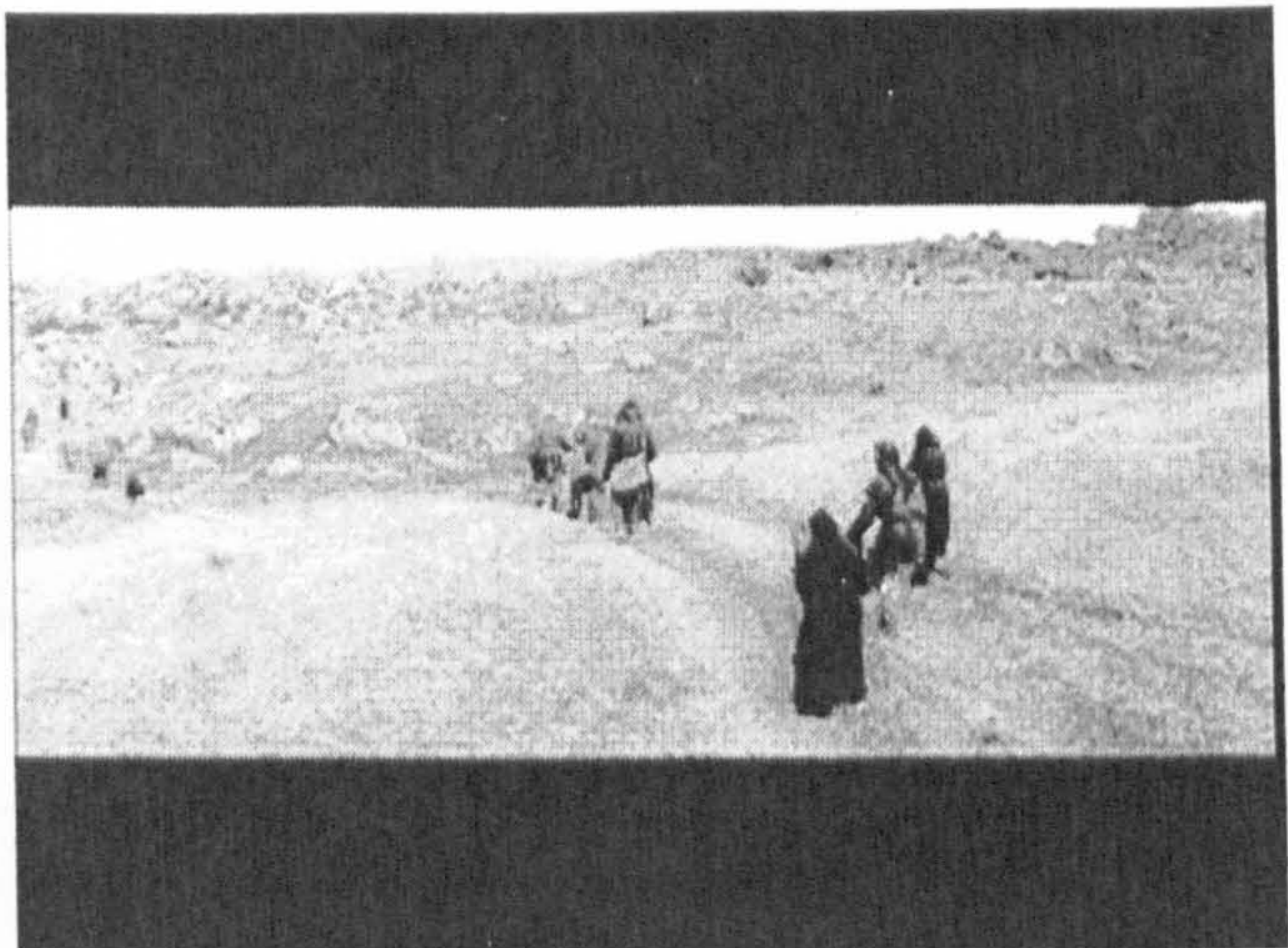
The opening moments of Kozintsev's *King Lear* exploit the cinematic medium to the full, focusing not on the dialogue which introduces us to the narrative in the source text but on establishing its preoccupation with giving voice to Shakespeare's verse in ways which are not reliant upon the spoken word. The first static frame is held for what seems like an unbearable length of time as Shostakovich's score adds a haunting edge to the confusing, claustrophobic image, barely recognisable as the woven fabric worn by the peasants who will soon dominate the screen and suggesting that it is they who will provide the canvas on which this tale is told. Initially, we are presented with a very still and mournful scene, the lone singing voice enhancing the stasis of the moment as does the grainy black and white quality of the film stock.

However, this is the only point at which we sense inertia and it offers a stark contrast to both the sequence of shots which follows and to the film as a whole. We cut to a shot of a muddy path, the sound of shuffling feet pre-empting their arrival into the frame as Shostakovich's score fades and the visual iconography of the road movie genre takes over, presenting us with varying modes of transportation used to traverse the landscape. As we track their progress, Kozintsev focuses on a humane image of family unity: a child is pulled along on a make-shift cart, cared for by a woman who strokes his head tenderly. From this intimate microcosm of human existence we move to a wide angled shot which places them within a long procession of peasants who are relentlessly moving towards some common point in the distance. The camera, often positioned at the forefront of the shot, seems to track backwards as people walk towards the lens, moving into and out of the frame, creating a sense of

momentum and implying that the line stretches on endlessly, as the sound of trudging feet is heard alongside the lone voice of the opening credits sequence.



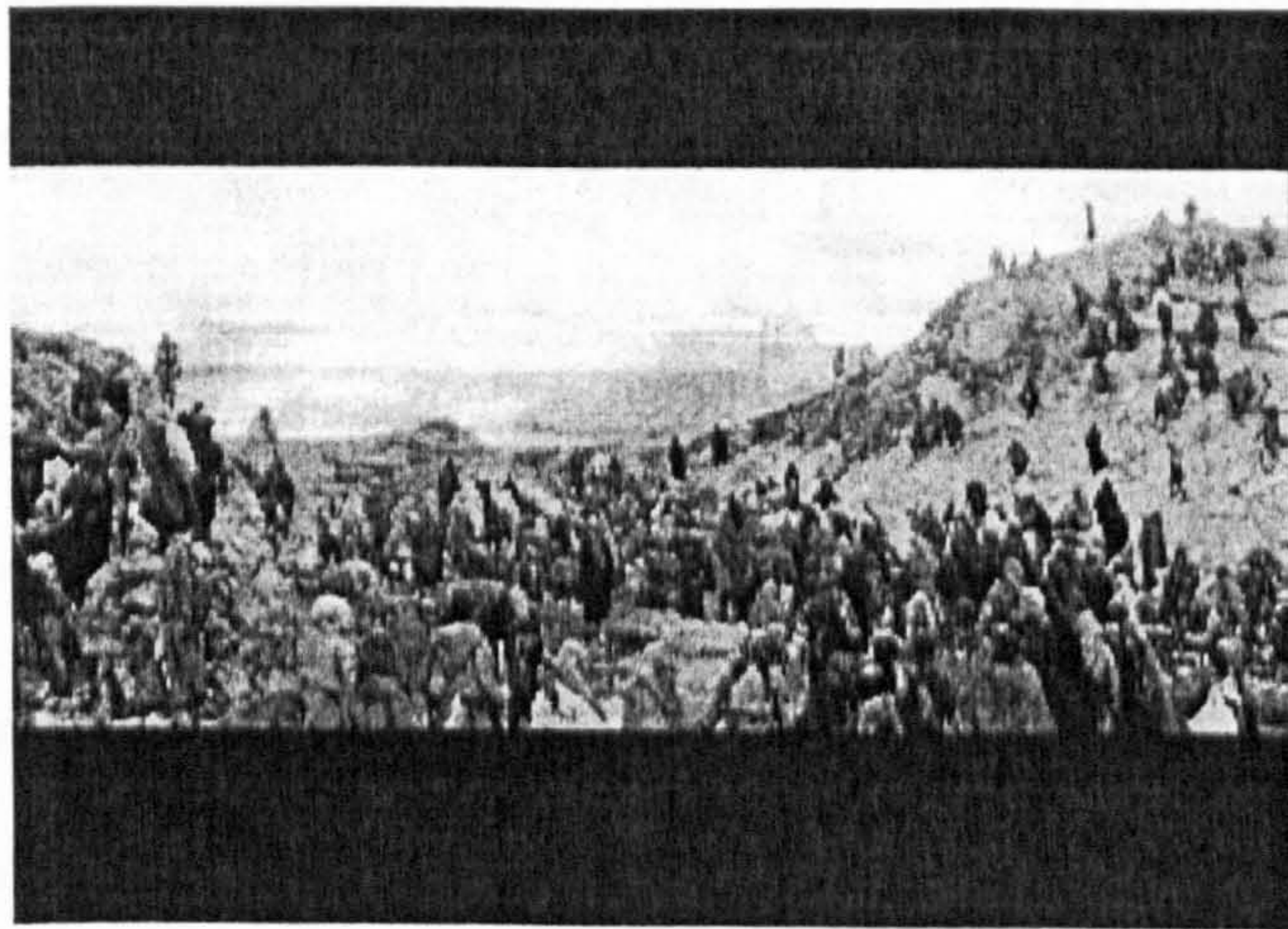
2.8 *Korol Lir* (1970)



2.9 *Korol Lir* (1970)

In other instances we assume a more voyeuristic viewing position as the camera tracks behind rocks, grass and the shoulders of the walkers providing us with a parallel sense of motion. The landscape itself is a polluted expanse of terrain near Narva, spoiled by the State Regional Electric Power Station,³² devoid of life and indicative of state destruction past and present, but it is also a landscape teeming with humanity and it is this that Kozintsev is at pains to highlight in these establishing shots.

The collective experience is going to be of major importance within this Russian rendition of *King Lear*. Their movement is slow and the camera lingers on their progress along the road that stretches out before them. The repetitive nature of the shots here creates a kind of “visual alliteration”³³ reminiscent of the overlapping editorial techniques employed by the Soviet Montage School in the 1920s and used to elongate the passage of time. Prior to a shift of attention to Lear’s soldiers who wait nervously on horseback in front of his castle, we have a static shot as the peasants file past us in their teeming hordes. The sequence culminates in a very painterly wide angle shot held for four seconds: Lear’s subjects frame its edges as they clamber over every vacant inch of hillside to strain towards Lear’s castle, centrally placed to highlight its symbolic importance yet distanced in the background of the shot and shrouded in fog, as if less substantial than either the human beings who surround it or the land on which it rests.



2.10 *Korol Lir* (1970)

We return to such sequences throughout the film, bearing witness to the ways in which Lear’s actions impact upon the masses, forcing them back on the road as exiles in a war-torn country, and the camera is continually drawn back to the landscape underlining the film’s affiliation with the road movie genre in terms of its subject matter and its cinematic style.

The orderly line of soldiers on horseback that flanks the walls of Lear's castle provides an interface between the populace and the 'civilized' world of the court. Although they assume a position of greater power and status, the soldiers seem edgy, nervously shifting in their saddles as if perturbed by the hordes of peasants who surround them, unsure of their own affiliations. Only at this point do we move to the opening dialogue of the source text- a dialogue which is built upon Boris Pasternak's translation of the play but which, when transposed to English subtitles on the screen, fails to reflect what is actually being said by the actors speaking Kozintsev's lines. We have instead lines from Shakespeare's play which are approximations of what Kozintsev intended and which can obviously be misleading.³⁴ However, Kozintsev's *Lir* is more reliant upon the kind of visual and aural signification of the cinema than upon the spoken verse of Brook's version in which the word takes centre stage even though we are dealing with the medium of film.

Once we move into the confines of the castle walls, Kozintsev again loads the scenes with a sense of relentless motion and employs a heavily loaded *mise en scène*. We see Gloucester and Kent walking as they discuss Lear's decision to divide his land; we see courtiers lining the walls and servants coming into and going out of shot, taking up positions for this important occasion; we witness the arrival of Burgundy and France as they assume their positions, flanked by their entourage and by their royal insignia. It is a scene peopled by a shifting population all of whom are there at Lear's bidding, as are his subjects beyond the walls of the castle. Kozintsev constructs an orderly and very public space, "as similar as possible to contemporary diplomatic receptions: polite, inscrutable faces: the savage animal hidden behind a civilized exterior,"³⁵ working in direct contrast to the visual disorder presented by the peasants beyond the walls of the court. This seemingly civilized space, punctuated by

public rituals, is yet another sign of conformity to the expectations of the genre of integration; but Kozintsev plays with expectation here since the value system of the court is exposed as corrupt: the 'civilized space' is to be found instead beyond the confines of the castle walls. Lear's decision to divide his kingdom prior to his death is, however, construed by Kozintsev as a wise decision, brought about by his desire to prevent future strife, "the allotment of property [having] been concluded long before the court ceremony", making this opening scene with his daughters "a final rite"³⁶ to be played out within the expected 'civilized' traditions of Lear's court. There is a business-like emphasis upon both the division of the kingdom and on the arrangement of Cordelia's marriage, and Lear emerges initially as a caring father and benevolent ruler.

Cordelia is also introduced in motion as she hurriedly descends the stairs, clearly preoccupied with things other than matters of state. She is immediately to be seen as "a being from a different race," one who "doesn't know how to wear court dress," her "strides too long" as she runs into shot "like a peasant girl."³⁷ Her difference is emphasised visually not only by the stark contrast of her simple white attire and its blatant associations with innocence and virtue but by the clarity of her image, framed in a warm, bright light at all times. However, the visual allusion to Carl Dreyer's *Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) is quite striking, investing her with strength and a warrior-like dimension which pre-empts her rebellious act; according to Kozintsev she "has no thought of rebellion" and yet she is "herself a rebellion, isolated from the rest by her very naturalness,"³⁸ a naturalness he continues to build upon by aligning her with nature and life beyond the castle walls as the narrative progresses. She assumes an initial position of isolation within the frame, unlike her sisters who are flanked by husband, by entourage and the insignia of state. The kind of devil/angel

dichotomy so carefully avoided in Brook's *King Lear* is foregrounded by Kozintsev from the outset. The heavy-handed stereo-typing of Goneril and Regan is instantly conveyed via their black attire, creating a striking visual contrast to Cordelia and suggesting rather obviously their affiliation with all things evil. In everything from their costumes to their movement, Goneril and Regan stand in visual opposition to Cordelia. They are attentive of court procedures and eager to participate whilst Cordelia must be reminded to attend to state matters at the prompting of her nurse, accentuating her child-like innocence and disregard for such things.

Just as she is the first woman to enter screen space, it is Cordelia rather than her sisters who dominates the frame throughout the opening moments. When all three stand together as Lear calls them forth, Cordelia appears in the centre of the shot, the light focusing on her form as Goneril and Regan confine her from its darker edges, offering once more a loaded *mise en scène* in which Cordelia becomes synonymous with virtue, her sisters with corruption and evil. They function as a dual construct of the "savage animal hidden behind a civilized exterior"³⁹ to which Kozintsev continually alludes through use of symbolic editing, reminiscent of the Soviet Montage School of film-making, cutting from shots of Goneril and Regan to close up shots of dogs, chained and salivating as the narrative progresses.

Given the attentive nature of the court as it awaits Lear's arrival, we anticipate the entrance of some grand monarch of epic proportions but Kozintsev undercuts our expectation, heralding Lear's arrival by off-screen sounds of laughter and jingling bells which jar with the solemnity of the now static interior shot. Our first glimpse of Lear, focusing on his back, reveals a white-haired man of small stature, his face obscured initially by the angle of the shot and secondly by the mask he wears as he enters the room alongside his fool with whom he is closely associated from the outset,

underlining the 'buddy' element Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* shares with other road movies. The two seem indistinguishable at first, both of them looking carefree yet frail and emaciated within the shared frame that introduces them, their behaviour clashing with the serious intent of the court and setting them apart from it. Lear, though, unlike his subjects, has the power to break the codes and conventions of court behaviour ; he commands the cinematic space as soon as he enters, even as he flaunts expectation. All eyes focus on and follow Lear as he orchestrates proceedings and the camera tracks him from behind the bodies of the assembled courtiers, lending the sequence a voyeuristic edge. He assumes a domestic pose, seated on a stool alongside the hearth, associated at an iconic level with images of the family and " the prehistoric hearth," lending his image a 'feminine' dimension. It is an "ancient fireplace" around which we have "a father and his three daughters - the family, the clan"; but Kozintsev stresses that "it is only a touch,"⁴⁰ soon displaced by the wrath of the patriarch who is disobeyed. As Lear's decree is publicly proclaimed by one of his courtiers, the camera cuts to the domesticated image of him warming his hands at the fire, fondly slapping away the hands of the fool or stroking his head , constructing Lear as the benevolent patriarch as opposed to the tyrannical ruler traditionally evoked in the first act of stage productions of the play. But there are already signs that Lear's benevolence is not genuine at this stage: not only does he enter wearing a mask but he is also able to switch his role with disturbing ease, assuming command at whim, and later leaving the fool to be treated inhumanely as yet another of his chattels as they journey from castle to castle. The fool becomes emblematic of Lear's mistreatment of the wider populace and, contrary to events in the source text, remains by Lear's side throughout the film.

Kozintsev's repeated use of fire imagery litters the scene, from the fire in the hearth at which Lear sits to the torches burning on the walls. As he moves to the business of the 'love test', we cut to a shot of Lear from behind the "ancient" hearth, its flames momentarily distorting the image of Cordelia, and foreshadowing at a metaphorical level the "wrath of the dragon" which is about to be unleashed, once again indicating that it is his relationship with Cordelia rather than her sisters that dominates in this production. When Lear summons his daughters, Cordelia is the focus of the shot; Goneril and Regan step into a frame already occupied by her and their respective deliveries are shortened. We sense the performance element of their delivery but it is the edits to Cordelia that demand our attention even as they speak since the camera slowly moves into rare close up shots of her face, privileging her asides spoken in voice-over, and establishing an intimacy with the audience. Moreover, the striking visual contrast between Cordelia and her sisters is exaggerated by the constant editing from one to the other. The body language and facial expressions of the 'evil' sisters, when combined with their loaded costuming and Cordelia's revelatory asides results in a very traditional reading of Regan and Goneril as the epitome of evil.

Kozintsev may argue that it is part of his intent to tell a tale simply and the audience is left in no doubt as to who are the villains and who are the heroes here, but the two-dimensional nature of their portrayal jars with expectations of its art house status. They are portrayed as wicked and lascivious throughout the film. Kozintsev denies them any appealingly sensual edge, unlike their male counterpart, Edmund, who is seen as "an active and enterprising character" and "a legitimate child of the new age."⁴¹ His potential redemption, despite his treacherous acts, is retained within the narrative: Kozintsev chooses to include Edmund's acceptance of the unknown

warrior's challenge, and his confessional attempt to save Lear and Cordelia is given screen prominence, affording him a human dimension withheld from Regan and Goneril. Dymphna Callaghan notes that in Shakespeare's tragedies "masculine transgressions are constructed in a way that frequently displace the blame and guilt onto representations of woman [within] the tragic narrative."⁴² Kozintsev, in adhering to this tendency in his screen version constructs what, from a twenty-first century perspective, amounts to a disturbingly misogynistic interpretation of the text. He denies them their closing moment at the end of Scene One, purposely editing out their doubts as to Lear's reliability and undermining any sense that they are operating together out of necessity from the outset. The moment is instead given over to close up images of a vulnerable, victim-like Lear presided over by his 'evil' daughters. Similarly, their lust for Edmund is aligned with aberrant sexuality. As the narrative progresses we move through a sequence of shots which constructs a deviant representation of female sexuality. From a shot of Gloucester's blinding we cut to Edmund and Goneril dressing after sex; we move on to a shot of Regan tearing at Edmund's clothes, editing to a closing shot of the unclothed body of Cornwall as Regan proceeds to kiss his corpse. Such definitions of woman in relation to her sexuality serve to reinforce phallogentric notions that female sexuality is abject⁴³ and in his construction of Regan and Goneril, Kozintsev engages in a misogynistic representation of female sexuality, offering a reaffirmation of the patriarchal symbolic order.

Kozintsev's construction of Cordelia does transcend the stereotypical: she is synonymous with virtue yet she is also the "fair warrior" whose act of rebellion is a consequence of her naturalness⁴⁴ rather than her perversity. But as the "transgressive sinner" set up as a "moral touchstone"⁴⁵ for the males within the narrative, she too

remains an intrinsic part of the patriarchal order, her function being defined by its codes. Kozintsev emphasises her alignment with the King of France throughout the opening moments, introducing a romantic element into the narrative. As she delivers her responses to Lear, Kozintsev includes a series of edits to France and he is often placed in the background of frames dominated by Cordelia, his interpreter constantly engaged in the act of translating her every word, lending the scene an intimate intensity and suggesting a desire for closeness on his part prior to Lear's opening of negotiations for the rejected Cordelia. During these negotiations, France and his interpreter share the frame once more with Cordelia. Although his dialogue is curtailed, France's attachment is conveyed via the spatial dimensions of the shot: Cordelia's gaze is averted but his eyes are fixed firmly on her as they walk together towards the camera's lens, and it is Cordelia's voice-over soliloquy which dominates, inferring a sense of equality within their impending union.

Cordelia and France have a much greater presence in Kozintsev's screen version: they become synonymous with a virtue which stands in opposition to the barbarity of Lear's court and considerable screen time is given to their departure. In contrast to the unified and dignified image presented by the departing Cordelia and France, a frenzied Lear from this point onwards appears to be in perpetual motion, striding out, commanding all before him through the power of his body language as the camera tracks him and his followers along the line of possessions he wants to take with him on what will become his journey of redemption. The camera pans in close up images of salivating dogs and birds of prey chained to posts, the cacophony of bestial noises adding to the disturbing quality of the moment, and offering a stark contrast to the images we come to associate with Cordelia and France, positioned beyond the confines of the castle walls amongst the natural landscape and water

imagery introduced by Kozintsev. From here, Lear ascends the outer staircase in a final demonstration of power, his figure diminished by the scale of the architecture, his isolation from the rest of humanity highlighted as we cut initially to the waiting crowds in a high angle shot which momentarily magnifies their powerlessness, but then switches to a high angle shot of the isolated Lear, cloaked in the fog of the symbolic flames burning upon the parapets (see illustration 2.7).

Kozintsev's image system is constantly dependent upon the kind of symbolic juxtaposition readily associated with the Soviet Montage School of film-making, and this is one aspect of his later work which clearly connects with his earlier cinematic style. The closing moments of the sequence alternate between shots of Cordelia's leave-taking and Lear's hurried departure, the tranquillity and simplicity of the former contrasting with the mayhem and huge scale of the latter. Lear's train is associated with images of brutality: we see the fool dragged along on a chain and we cut once more to low angle shots of dogs and birds of prey. As Shostakovich's dramatic score builds in momentum, we are presented with an image of Cordelia and France positioned on the brow of the hill, as if watching over Lear from a distance, establishing a sense of their continued presence throughout the narrative as the final frame of the opening sequence holds on a low angle shot of the misty horizon, returning us to the notion that, as in all road movies, the landscape is a brooding presence in and of itself.

Kozintsev employs a conventional approach to the narration of a well-known and often told tale. Although he avoids the trappings of the heritage genre so readily associated with adaptations of Shakespeare to screen, his film conforms to mainstream expectations in many ways: from its adherence to classical narrative forms, to its use of accepted film grammar; from its construction of clearly delineated

archetypes, often of a very two-dimensional nature, to its associations with the stylistic, thematic and ideological properties of the road movie genre. As an exploration of the disintegration of patriarchy at both an institutional and a familial level it is somewhat disappointing: it fails to connect with the play's ideological questioning of patriarchy, invoking in its audience an emotional rather than an intellectual response to the narrative. From a feminist perspective Kozintsev's treatment of womanhood is distinctly dated and worryingly misogynistic and from a Marxist perspective his depiction of the proletariat is romanticised. Patriarchy is represented as a misguided institution rather than one which is inherently corrupt and outmoded. However, when exploring the text as a piece of genre cinema associated with the road movie, a fresh perspective does emerge. In adopting the stylistic motifs of that genre, Kozintsev produces a work of cinematic art that transcends its original treatment on the stage, giving full scope to the filmic potential of the narrative and ensuring its accessibility to a mainstream audience despite its subtitled format. In one sense, by adhering so closely to the narrative momentum of the source text, Kozintsev's film fails to transcend what Charles Marowitz calls "the deplorable, anal retentiveness" of the canon,⁴⁶ but in a filmic sense he does widen the scope of the narrative, the journeying motif lending itself to the kind of visual representation possible only within the realms of the cinema.

¹ *The Taming of the Shrew* (1966), Franco Zeffirelli; *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), Franco Zeffirelli; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1968), Peter Hall; *Hamlet* (1969), Tony Richardson; *Julius Caesar* (1970), Stuart Burges; *Macbeth* (1971), Roman Polanski.

² *Don Kikhot* (1957), *Gamlet* (1964).

³ In his introduction to *Shakespeare on Film* (Basingstoke, 1998) Robert Shaughnessy lists *Korol Lir*, Peter Brook's *King Lear* (1971) and *Ran* (1985) as films which form part of the accepted canon of Shakespeare on screen, echoing the scholarly position of other Shakespeare critics: Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (London, 1977); Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare and the Moving Image* (Cambridge, 1999); Kenneth Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (London, 1990) and *A History of Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁴ Ronald Hayman, "Interview with director Grigori Kozintsev", *Transatlantic Review*, Vol. Summer, 1973.p.11.

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- ⁵ Grigori Kozintsev, *The Space of Tragedy* (London, 1977), p.37.
- ⁶ David Bordwell and Kirsten Thompson, Eds., *Film History: an Introduction* (2nd Ed. New York, 2003).p.126.
- ⁷ Murray Smith, "World Cinema and Critical Approaches: Modernism and the Avant-Gardes", *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Eds., John Hill and Pamela Church-Gibson (Oxford, 1998), p.400.
- ⁸ Bordwell and Thompson, p.460.
- ⁹ <http://www.imdb.com>, 8/8/05.
- ¹⁰ Hayman, p.10.
- ¹¹ Grigori Kozintsev, *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience* (London, 1967).
- ¹² Grigori Kozintsev, *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy* (London, 1977).
- ¹³ Hayman, p.10.
- ¹⁴ Hayman quoting Kozintsev, p.11.
- ¹⁵ Hayman quoting Kozintsev, pp.11-12.
- ¹⁶ Schatz, "Hollywood Genres: Film Genre and the Genre Film", *Film Theory and Criticism*, Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford, 2004), p.698.
- ¹⁷ Richard Taylor, *BFI Companion to Eastern European and Russian Cinema*, Eds., Julian Graffy, Dian Iordanova, Nancy Wood, Richard Taylor (London, 2000). P. 218.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p.219.
- ¹⁹ www.film-philosophy.com/vol4-2000/n4totaro, 22/8/05.
- ²⁰ Murray Smith, p. 402.
- ²¹ Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London, 2000).p.206.
- ²² Ibid., pp.226-227.
- ²³ Kozintsev, *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy*, p. 37.
- ²⁴ Ibid.,p.37.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 26.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p.26.
- ²⁷ Kozintsev, *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy*, p. 35.
- ²⁸ Hayman quoting Kozintsev, p.12.
- ²⁹ Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (London, 1971), p.80.
- ³⁰ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Film-making and the Studio System* (New York, 1981).
- ³¹ All references to William Shakespeare's *King Lear* will be taken from *The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series): King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London:1997) and will be incorporated into the text.
- ³² Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear* (Manchester, 1991), p.83.
- ³³ Kozintsev, *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy*, p. 121.
- ³⁴ Leggatt, p. 80.
- ³⁵ Kozintsev, *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy*, p. 42-43.
- ³⁶ Kozintsev, *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*, p.55.
- ³⁷ Kozintsev, *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy*, p.69-70.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p.70.
- ³⁹ Kozintsev, *King Lear: The Space of Tragedy*, p. 42-43
- ⁴⁰ Hayman quoting Kozintsev, p.12.
- ⁴¹ Kozintsev, *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*, p. 100.
- ⁴² Dymrna Callaghan, *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (Hemel Hempstead, 1989), p.62.
- ⁴³ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, 1993), p.151-152.
- ⁴⁴ Kozintsev, *The Space of Tragedy*, p. 70.
- ⁴⁵ Callaghan, p.64.
- ⁴⁶ Charles Marowitz, *Recycling Shakespeare* (London, 1991), p.15.

2.4 “All our lives we’d looked out for each other the way that motherless children tend to do”:¹ *King Lear* as Melodrama.

Written by Laura Jones, an adept and prolific adapter of literary texts to screen,² *A Thousand Acres* (1997) presents Jane Smiley’s revisionist version of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* within the cinematic conventions of the melodrama. Whether we view Smiley’s novel or Shakespeare’s play as the resultant film’s originary source, its affiliation with the genre of melodrama is indisputable; the tagline, “Best friends. Bitter rivals. Sisters,” foregrounds the importance of its female protagonists within the context of ‘family’, and precipitates emotional excess.

As with film noir, the issues surrounding melodrama as a genre continue to generate debate: it is a genre which is constantly redefined at a critical level, arguably part of *all* Hollywood narratives rather than a clearly delineated genre with a distinct set of codes and conventions specific to a particular ‘type’ of film. Rick Altman claims that melodrama has “a syntax but lacks a clear semantic dimension,”³ while Linda Williams sees it as a “mode” or a “tendency,” its formal and stylistic motifs varying according to both its era of production and its medium.⁴ Indeed, *A Thousand Acres* has been labelled pure “soap opera”⁵ in some critical circles and in a nineties context the parallels between the cinematic mode of melodrama and televised ‘soap’ are inevitable. What we have come to associate with the genre of melodrama in its populist sense is a narrative which gives centre-stage to ‘feminine’ experience, usually within a domestic, familial setting. But feminist theorists of the seventies have posthumously generated the acceptance of a ‘gendered melodrama’ or ‘woman’s film’, the characteristics of which are seen to invest the films with a subversive sub-textual energy. The

works of such fifties Hollywood directors as Douglas Sirk thus become politicized and when read from a feminist perspective the woman's 'weepie,' epitomized by its emotive and stylistic excess, becomes synonymous with a potentially subversive form of cinema.

The melodrama's preoccupation with the patriarchal institution of family, and to a lesser degree marriage, lends itself to certain aspects of the *Lear* narrative but the genre's traditional focus on the woman's position within the family offers a shift of perspective away from the violence of the male-centred approaches embodied in the western or the gangster genres which focus on Lear's experience. Jones' screenplay (and initially Smiley's novel) presents us with both a reoriented and a remotivated narrative,⁶ aligning us with Ginny's/Goneril's point of view and redefining her motivation and that of her sister, Rose/Regan, who are constructed here as sexually abused offspring. However, the screenplay's diminishment of both the novel's monetary aspects and the play's subplot, and the omission of Ginny's attempt to poison Rose resituate the narrative, making it in Smiley's estimation "a movie about sisters rather than a movie about siblings," with the last line of the movie - she wants to "give the children something [she] never had, which is hope" - casting Ginny in the role of "perennial victim": 'hope' here is based on "wishing and escape rather than on understanding and coming to terms."⁷ By denying Ginny the capacity to commit her own evil act the film, according to Smiley, denies her a means of coming to terms with evil in others, her father in particular. Just as Nahum Tate's melodramatic stage version of *King Lear* ends on an optimistic note, the close of the film reflects the more upbeat cinematic conventions of melodrama rather than the tenuous resolutions offered either by Smiley's novel or Shakespeare's play. Smiley cites other instances in which novel

and film treat the narrative differently, the former integrating and examining issues related to incest at an ideological level throughout while the latter uses it as a “punchline”⁸ at a much later point in its narrative structure. Whilst Smiley’s novel is about the dynamics between female and male characters, the film is seen to be dominated by its women “to the exclusion of anyone else.”⁹ The film’s handling of the division of the land scene is a further notable failure in the novelist’s estimation: it is devoid of the necessary menace and impending doom, taking place in the sunny confines of the communal gathering held in honour of Jess’s/ Edmund’s return and presided over by a calm and rational Larry Cook/ Lear as opposed to the drunken, impulsive father drawn in the novel.¹⁰ However, Smiley also concedes that each writer, whether of stage play, novel or screenplay, “uses the tools of its genre to gain and communicate insight into the material,” and that its continued recycling is a “testament” to the “ongoing power” of the Lear myth as a narrative template.¹¹ As such, what Smiley sees as fundamental flaws in the film may be construed as conscious inclusions and omissions related to the governing codes and conventions of on-screen melodrama, written for a cinema-going audience in a post-feminist era.

Both novel and film operate beyond the confines of tragic conventions; they deal instead with the conventions of domestic fiction, relating a “representative story, not an extreme story”¹² in a realistic manner. ‘Tragic’ notions of the ‘hero’ of Western tragedy and Western literature, Western philosophical ‘positions’ about the significance of that hero’s demise, are consciously abandoned in pursuit of a more credible and sustainable depiction of life. Similarly, despite the novel being commandeered as a ‘feminist’ text, there is little to suggest that Ginny or Rose, late seventies Iowa housewives whose

community is dominated by a male work ethos and female domesticity, *see* themselves as ‘feminists’ or as part of that whole debate. They are constructed in novel and film as unwittingly repressed individuals, similar to the various heroines found in the fifties melodramas of Douglas Sirk, operating within a strictly delineated domestic space as part of a stable society with a strong moral code.



2.11 *A Thousand Acres* (1997)

The novel examines issues at a personal level; however, like Shakespeare's play, it also presents us with a critique of patriarchy, in this instance through its contextualizing of the 'political' via an exploration of the monetary fall-out of Larry's division of the land and its critique of capitalism in general. The film is much more concerned with the personal issues being confronted by the sisters - including their own material transgressions as well as those of their father - than with any of the wider implications of a failed patriarchal system. Yet the film's focus on the personal does not necessarily make it a lesser text. Its engagement with feminist issues is there by inference, even though cloaked in the more palatable populist guise of the familiar codes and conventions of the melodrama: the emotional life of women is foregrounded and given a 'voice' through which

the problematics associated with social constructs of femininity and male exploitation of women is addressed.

But given the conventions of melodrama in particular and its classification as a genre of integration/ indeterminate space in general, the extent of any such critique is inevitably limited. According to Langford, melodrama belongs to a “fundamentally non-contestatory mode, one that insists on the rightness and the validity of binding social institutions such as marriage and family.”¹³ Like the musical or the romantic comedy, it occupies an ideological ‘space’ characterised by its stability and is dependent upon “a highly conventionalised value system.”¹⁴ The community’s values are not challenged directly - the abuses perpetrated by the grand patriarch, Larry Cook, are never revealed to the community at large, despite Rose’s deathbed wishes - and the ‘stable milieu’ provided by that community is sustained. It remains an ideologically stable and ‘civilised space’ because the transgressions of the community’s father figure are kept hidden.

The protagonist’s struggle to align, or realign, her views with those of the community at large forms the stock narrative momentum for such dramas. Yet within family melodramas there surface “contradictory imperatives” battling to both expose and repress the flaws within the family unit,¹⁵ and it is Ginny’s inner struggle in coming to terms with her repressed memories of paternal sexual abuse that forms this film’s ideological and narrative focus. Our viewing experience is filtered through Ginny’s voice-over, giving us intimate access to her psychological conflict and narrating events from her perspective: we identify here with the female position rather than aligning our sympathies with the ageing Lear figure, Larry Cook. However, conventionally, while the genre of indeterminate space foregrounds female experience, it engages more often with the experience of the

feminised couple/ group, and in *A Thousand Acres*, even though Ginny's story dominates, it is Ginny and Rose, presented as the wronged couple, whose path we follow.



2.12 *A Thousand Acres* (1997)

They share the secret of their abuse and of their adulterous affairs with Jess. There are numerous moments in which the sisters share the cinematic frame in shot compositions dominated by scenes in kitchens, on the porches of their homes, on the perimeters of their gardens, looking out onto fields populated by labouring men and machinery who are constructed in binary opposition to the sisters' domesticated domain. We are also presented with stock melodramatic deathbed moments complete with trite, sentimental dialogue; Ginny's line, "What am I going to do without you," cuts to the prescribed close-up of their tightly held hands, as Rose delivers her final summation: "I don't have any accomplishments...I didn't get Daddy to know what he did. But I saw without being afraid, without turning away. I didn't forgive the unforgivable." Ginny's voice-over is similarly loaded with emotive excess, her assumption that they

would “always be together, forever on this thousand acres,” or that “the hardest part was leaving Rose,” underlining the sisterly bond at the core of this tale.

However, the contradictory imperatives at work within *A Thousand Acres* make for a closure that breaks away from the expected reintegration of the protagonists into the communal fold. Both Ginny and Rose are seen as pillars of their conformist Iowa farming community through their affiliation with the Cook dynasty. Their identities are firmly rooted in their position as daughters of the community’s leading patriarch. Rose wants to shatter the smug morality of the community that reveres a man who she knows is an incestuous bully and it is her dying wish that Ginny expose him; yet she has never chosen either to expose him during her lifetime or to leave that community, even though she sends her daughters into a safer environment. Ginny, on the other hand, chooses to leave, rejecting the community and its values at a personal level and forging for herself a different kind of identity, but she refuses to confront the immorality fostered within its midst. In line with the conventions of melodrama as a film genre, the status quo is maintained at a societal level, and the female voice, though ‘found’, is then silenced.

But the choice, as in all melodrama, ultimately lies with the female protagonist. Moreover, at a personal level, Ginny seems to have resolved her inner conflicts; she has come to terms with the repressed memories of her abuse. Yet, unlike the heroines of forties and fifties melodramas, she subverts generic expectation by choosing to leave home, husband and community, relinquishing - and thus critiquing in the process - all of the familial values for which they stand. Although Smiley may regard Ginny’s film construct as the ‘perennial victim’, within the parameters of the melodrama genre, Ginny’s choice may be defined as

heroic. The progression from “romantic antagonism” to “eventual embrace,” outlined as central to the genres of indeterminate space,¹⁶ revolves in this instance around the repressed memories that Ginny eventually learns to ‘embrace’: she deals with them and moves on, refusing to become the victim of the status quo. The ‘embrace’ envisaged in Shakespeare’s play, in which Lear is reconciled with Cordelia and with his own shortcomings, does not materialise in this film text, though screen time is devoted to a moment when Larry and Caroline/Cordelia are overheard reminiscing over a misplaced memory, Larry’s reference to Caroline as the “little birdie girl” echoing Lear’s sentiment in the play’s reunion scene. However, here the ‘embrace’ between Larry and Caroline is utilised as a plot device, triggering Ginny’s repressed memory of sexual abuse and realised on screen as a flashback, enabling her to finally acknowledge her past.

As a dynastic melodrama *A Thousand Acres* bears striking similarities to Sirk’s *Written on the Wind* (1956), a melodrama which, according to Langford, “associates issues of patriarchal authority in decline with eruptions of sexual and social deviance, and further links these pathologies to business and industrial crises,” the collapse of one being “directly implicated in the breakdown of the other.”¹⁷ The breakdown within the domestic arena in *A Thousand Acres* is precipitated by Larry’s division of the land, an act soon regretted by this petulant patriarch, linking his ‘domestic pathologies’ to his self-induced ‘business/industrial’ crisis. When Larry first enters screen space he dominates the frame in a low angle shot, Ginny standing subserviently in the background. His privileged place within the community is established at the film’s outset as they gather to celebrate the return of Harold Clarke’s ‘prodigal son’, Jess. We are presented with a tableau of communal harmony, all picnic tables and home-baked

fare; Ginny and Rose are very much a part of its ethos as they arrive with their own pies and pastries. We enter knowingly into the domestic sphere heralded by the film's genre, and the voice-over saturation that sets the story in motion leaves us in no doubt as to its engagement with female experience, despite our intertextual assumptions about the direction a narrative based on the Lear myth will take. Even the division of the land scene, denounced as bland and ineffectual by Smiley, is reconfigured in line with the motivations of the melodrama genre. It is a moment that traditionally revolves around the Lear figure, his personality dominating the scene, but in *A Thousand Acres* the division is conducted in an almost casual, conversational manner at the celebratory picnic. It is a moment which is devoid of emotive energy, focusing audience attention *not* on male experience but on female responses to male actions, and it subverts our expectations - expectations which are intrinsically linked to Shakespeare's version of events.

Jess's role is also redefined according to the female driven conventions of melodrama. No longer the charismatic anti-hero, he becomes the transient representative of a new order, a new value system that operates outside the set values of the land-bound community so central to *A Thousand Acres*. He is the catalyst for the sisters' adulterous transgressions, providing the impetus for the stock temptation at the core of melodrama. However, unlike the heroines of forties and fifties melodramas like *Brief Encounter* (1945) and *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), the transgressions of Ginny and Rose are realised, providing a turning point for the formerly submissive Ginny. In true melodramatic style, her unruly desires erupt first in the domestic sphere in the form of an adulterous affair

but , more importantly, they lead her to question the wider social order and her father's prominent place within it.

The excessive visual style of fifties melodrama is cited by feminist theorists as a "subversion of ideological norms."¹⁸ Unable to transgress in reality, the unruly desires of the fifties heroine of melodrama are realised instead through the creation of a coded *mise en scène*, evoked by a lush, seductive colour palette characterised by visual excess, and providing a "cathartic burst of cinematic rapture for the audience to counterpoint the joy denied the heroine."¹⁹ In *A Thousand Acres* Moorhouse's focus on the beauty and the grandeur of the land creates a similar visual excess: shots of vast stretches of fertile land coloured by autumnal sunshine establish an overwhelming sense of place not only in the film's opening moments but throughout the narrative. Such shots establish Ginny's connection with the land her family has farmed for generations, acting as visual shorthand for the immense hold it has over her, and explaining in part her continued presence in what we come to know is a place imbued with memories of childhood abuse. The storm scene offers a visual contrast to such colour-drenched landscape shots; grey clouds, thunder, lightning, accompanied by a highly dramatic orchestral score provide the backdrop to Larry's vitriolic and unprovoked verbal attack on Ginny and Rose, the *mise en scène* reflecting the ugliness of his lines as he labels Ginny a "dried up bitch" and threatens to "throw you whores off this place." Rose's similarly unprovoked rage erupts during a moment of seeming domestic harmony as the family gathers to play Monopoly, suggesting undercurrents of emotion not yet expressed. Such emotive excess is also characteristic of the genre's performance style: it is a mode that is heavily dependent upon acting styles and upon quality of performance. The deathbed

scenes, punctuated by the kind of excessive orchestral score associated with melodrama and loaded with emotive dialogue, could become mawkish and trite, but the measured performances of Jessica Lange and Michelle Pfeiffer lend the scenes a credibility and poignancy that belies the genre's inherent sentimentality. Without such performances 'women's weepies', rescued for critical attention by seventies feminists, could easily regress to being regarded as a "despised form," wallowing in sentiment rather than "offer[ing] objects of study to which women's experience [is] central."²⁰

Whether melodrama as a genre can sustain its place in a post-feminist era within a film industry in which visual style over narrative substance is becoming the norm is debatable. Critical reception of the film was poor, regardless of its 'star' casting and the literary pedigree of the screenplay's source texts. Despite opening on over 1200 screens the film took under three million dollars, grossing just eight million in total during its theatrical release. By placing the narrative within the realms of melodrama Jones shifts the focus not only to female experience but to small-town repression and preoccupations of the personal rather than the universal. For Roger Ebert it becomes "an ungainly, undigested assembly of 'women's issues', milling about within a half-baked retread of King Lear," borrowing plot elements from the play but not "fac[ing] up to its essentials."²¹ Ebert's harsh criticism highlights some of the problems faced by the screenwriter whose aim is to employ a populist genre format to the adaptation of an iconic literary text, but the problem is exacerbated by the fact that Jones is dealing with the reworking of not only a classic, modernist novel but, by intertextual reference, a classic Renaissance play. When reconfigured in the guise of melodrama, these problems are compounded by the fact that we are now in a post-feminist era in

which the audience is less likely to 'buy into' the notion of victim heroines of a Sirkian persuasion, even in a saga about repressed memories of childhood abuse.

¹ *A Thousand Acres*, 1997.

² Laura Jones adapted a further six literary 'classics' during 1990 - 2002: *An Angel at My Table* (1990); *Portrait of a Lady* (1996); *The Well* (1997); *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997); *Angela's Ashes* (1999); *Possession* (2002).

³ Rick Altman, "Cinemas and Genres," *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford, 1996), p. 32.

⁴ Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 42-88.

⁵ Mick LaSalle, "Acres' Bogs Down Despite Grand Cast," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15th Sept. 1997.

⁶ Definitions from Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2002), p.83.

⁷ Faye P. Whitaker and Susan Carlson, "Play to Novel to Film: an Interview with Jane Smiley on Rewriting Shakespeare," *Flyway*, 5:1/2, 1999, pp. 160-161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.162.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.166.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.153.

¹³ Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh, 2005), p.39.

¹⁴ Thomas Schatz, "Hollywood Genres: Film Genre and Genre Film," *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6th ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Martin Cohen (Oxford, 2004), p.698.

¹⁵ Langford, p.47.

¹⁶ Schatz, p.698.

¹⁷ Langford, p.48.

¹⁸ Langford, p.30.

¹⁹ Richard Falcon, "Magnificent Obsession," *Sight and Sound* 3, March, 2003, p.14.

²⁰ Falcon, p.12.

²¹ Roger Ebert, "A Thousand Acres," review of *A Thousand Acres*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 19th Sept., 1997.

2.5 *King Lear* as Western Elegy

The western's central position in the history of American cinema is well documented. It is a genre which has attracted considerable academic debate despite rather than because of its mainstream appeal and its association with the studio system. From the era of silent cinema up until its demise in the seventies, the western reigned supreme with around one hundred westerns being produced and released per year at the peak of its popularity in the fifties.¹ Post war America's thirst for macho, hero-driven narratives exploring the cult of masculinity embodied in the western resulted in an upsurge in the production of these specific genre films which, in the fifties, become significantly more complex at a psychological and a political level.² Measured against the backdrop of westerns made in the early fifties - *Broken Arrow* (1950); *Devil's Doorway* (1951); *High Noon* (1952); *Shane* (1953) - and preceding marginally John Ford's *The Searchers* (1955), Edward Dmytryk's *Broken Lance* (1954) builds upon the kind of social criticisms being explored in these westerns, offering a commentary on the hypocrisy, racism and opportunism at the core of a post war America in the guise of the historically removed frontier western.

Dmytryk's film is often cited as a reworking of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, hero Matt Devereaux's sons being the cinematic equivalent of Lear's daughters, and there is *some* scholarly debate about the similarities between Shakespeare's play and this film text. However, with the exception of Tony Howard's very brief critique of *Broken Lance*³ and Robert Willson's blow-by-blow account of connections between characters in play text and film text,⁴ there is little academic discussion of this adaptation even though it is a film which poses interesting parallels with the Lear narrative at a thematic and an ideological level.

Due to Lear's preoccupation with redemption, Shakespeare's play can be seen as 'tailor-made' for cinematic realisation as a genre film which operates within the parameters of what Thomas Schatz defines as the genre of "integration" or "indeterminate space"; characterised by its *ideological* stability and dependent less upon a heavily coded sense of place than on a highly conventionalized value system, the dramatic conflict in such film worlds revolves around the protagonist's struggle to align - or realign - his or her views with those of the community at large.⁵ Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* and Moorhouse's *A Thousand Acres*, when read as road movie and melodrama respectively, can be classified as films which are primarily concerned with the lead character's journey towards some form of self-realisation and realignment with a particular value system. There are, however, few screen adaptations of the play which adopt this mode of address; instead, numerous screen versions employ the Lear narrative, albeit loosely, within the very different genre framework of "order" or "determinate space," characterised by its "ideologically contested space[s]."⁶ In westerns like *Broken Lance* - and, indeed, pseudo western *Ran* - or gangster films like *My Kingdom* and *The Godfather* trilogy the "symbolic arena of action" is all important as the setting becomes what Schatz terms "the cultural realm in which fundamental values are in a state of sustained conflict."⁷ The western's classification as a genre of determinate space predetermines the story's thematic concerns and its ideological position, leading us to expect a certain type of macho hero operating within a clearly defined cinematic world. We anticipate an ideologically contested setting in which society's values remain in flux, conflicts over territory and value systems providing the narrative momentum.

Broken Lance does follow the familiar western formula focusing on the expected territorial conflicts but it is also a 'message film' which won Dmytryk a Golden Globe for Promoting International Understanding and his veiled exposé of the corruption and racism at the core of American society presents further intriguing connections with the Lear myth. In addition to its Golden Globe award the film won a best writer's oscar for Philip Yordan whose western borrows heavily from his earlier screen adaptation of John Weidman's novel *House of Strangers* – a novel which in turn borrows from Shakespeare's reconfigured narration of the Lear myth, creating a web of intertextual references not only to the original prose text but to other films and film genres, and to plays and theatre productions which have gone before it. Resituating the text to the frontier landscapes of America may seem a radical shift from the thematic and ideological premise of Shakespeare's play but, according to Tony Howard, the "western's simple conventions reinstate Renaissance codes of masculinity and poetic justice."⁸ The proud "founding fathers" of the frontier become the American equivalent of a patriarchal Lear whilst daughters become sons, mirroring the sexual conservatism of fifties Hollywood.⁹ Social disintegration and the violence inherent in such breakdown remains at the core of both *King Lear* and the western genre. Their heroes share an ambivalence towards the values of civilized society and as such it is hardly surprising to find that the Lear myth has been used on occasion by Hollywood as a narrative template for the western genre, and most recently as televised western *King of Texas* (2002).

In *Broken Lance* the ideologically contested space, in which territorial conflicts are an historical given, becomes a site of violent social disintegration. Devereaux's fierce defence of his land leads to the unlawful lynching of cattle

thieves and the anarchic destruction of the Associated Western Copper and Refining Company's copper mining operation which is polluting his water supply and killing his cattle: however, his violent responses to any infringement upon his hard-earned territorial gains - responses which once ensured his capacity to tame the frontier wilderness he functions within - set in motion the disintegration of his empire. The codes by which frontier heroes like Devereaux live are being superseded by those of an emerging 'civilization'. The 'old order' with which Devereaux aligns himself is associated with the land, dictatorial authority and a macho sensibility in much the same way as certain readings and performances of *King Lear* present us with a proactive autocratic monarch who is an agent of his own downfall rather than an elderly victim of society's neglect seeking the redemptive path. Devereaux's ideological position as archetypal western hero is undermined by the emergence of a 'new order' motivated by self interest, bourgeois values and a 'civilised', institutionalised *modus operandi*, whilst Lear's position as ruler, once relinquished by his own act of division of his territories, is swiftly and irredeemably usurped by a similarly 'new order' motivated by self-interest and epitomised by Edmund, Goneril, Oswald, Regan and Cornwall. Lear's claim that he will "resume the shape" that Goneril believes he has "cast off for ever" (1.4: 300-302) rings hollow as does Devereaux's empty threat to have the state governor he claims to have "put in that chair" removed unless he appoints a judge who will find in his favour in the prosecution brought against him by the copper mining company. Both texts explore the transitory nature of power and the fragile value systems underpinning them.

The play's reincarnation as a western demonstrates its capacity to be used as raw material employed in the exploration of other 'myths' at the forefront of

society's consciousness. Ostensibly a male-centred quest played out against a backdrop of contested territory, the western's sense of 'place' is pivotal: the 'frontier' becomes its "conceptual axis",¹⁰ transforming historical material - in this instance US frontier country of the 1890s - into "archetypal myth".¹¹ The western constructs a genre framework of mythical proportions, comparable to that achieved by Shakespearean tragedy, though by the very nature of its genre the western is contained by its historical context in a way that Shakespeare's *King Lear* is not. It is a genre of exteriors in which the landscape is constantly foregrounded; *Broken Lance*, shot in wide screen cinemascope, opens with a conventional panning shot of the wide open plains, establishing its genre status through a *mise en scène* loaded with western iconography and accompanied by a traditionally dramatic orchestral score.



2.13 *Broken Lance* (1954)

We move to the anticipated shots of the developing western frontier town, where the government building, the bank and the Foothill Land Office epitomise its progression from make-shift frontier settlement to 'civilized' town, providing in visual shorthand a sketch of the film world's contested 'spaces' - the "wilderness"

of the plains pitted against the evolving “civilisation” of the town, the archetypal western hero at odds with the “institutions” of government in accordance with the binary oppositions identified by Kites as central to the ideological preoccupations of the western.¹²



2.14 *Broken Lance* (1954)

Devereaux’s association with the open plains which dominate the opening and closing frames of the film underline the importance of his relationship with the land, his image becoming intertwined with that of the lone wolf who traverses the landscape in each scene. Although *King Lear* is a text which is free from chronological and geographical constraints it shares a parallel preoccupation with the land from the play’s outset; mapping of the division of the kingdom - its ‘contested spaces’ - forms the focal point of the opening moments, the map (and the territories it defines) symbolising Lear’s power and his affiliation with the land. What is staged through the ceremonious division of land at the start of the play is presented cinematically in *Broken Lance* via the lingering shots of the frontier landscape which will be contested throughout the narrative.

However, in western film text - and in Shakespeare's play script - there emerges what Langford terms "an almost contradictory interdependency of wilderness and civilisation".¹³ Placed on the borders of the unruly frontier, the western hero becomes representative of both its lawlessness and its social order, initially able to "mediate the forces of order and anarchy, yet somehow remaining separate from each."¹⁴ Devereaux tames the savage landscape and establishes a *kind* of social order: he is a solitary figure who yet remains the agent of a civilisation that ultimately resists his individualism and his ambivalent attitude towards the values of that emerging society. Devereaux's portrait continues to dominate the grand foyer of government house even after his demise, demonstrating his continuing significance to the fragile civilisation he has worked to establish but which has ultimately rejected his brand of law and order – a law and order which is generated by his own codes of honour and integrity, and which are at odds with the increasingly institutionalised, community-minded civilisation being cultivated as part of the newly tamed frontier.

As archetypal western hero Devereaux's screen construct is confined by the generic expectations of the fifties Hollywood studio system, leading to a much more black and white exploration of the solitary hero than we have come to expect of the protagonist in staged renditions of *King Lear*. The hero's complexities and his inner turmoil are exorcised in *Broken Lance* in pursuit of genre clarity, Devereaux's frustrations being presented cinematically by his outward shows of physical and verbal violence rather than through any exploration of his psyche. He is, according to Schatz's genre terminology "psychologically static," the "physical embodiment of an attitude, a style, a world view of a predetermined and essentially unchanging cultural posture."¹⁵

The film also follows Hollywood conventions in its desire to give clarity via the inclusion of a back-story that justifies Devereaux's lack of paternal care for his sons from his first marriage; whilst we are left to ponder the ambiguities of Lear's actions we are provided with a rationale for Devereaux's behaviour. In response to Senora Devereaux's claim that he has "never given them anything of [himself]" Devereaux argues that he had no time to show his motherless sons love because he was busy building up his ranching empire. Lear's lack of emotional sensitivity is similarly evidenced by his desire to test the love of his daughters in a public arena but we are given no direct justification for the hatred unleashed against him by Goneril and Regan: we are left to ponder the cause for such family breakdown. Though Dmytryk counters the potentially two-dimensional nature of his hero by giving him a social conscience from the outset, this western reincarnation of Lear constructs a hero for whom a redemptive path has no appeal and who sins as much as he is sinned against. Devereaux's response to the polluting of his lands at the hands of copper mining companies sanctioned by the government is excessively violent, resulting in a western showdown between Devereaux's men and the mineworkers. But just as Lear is forced to bow down to the forces of a new order, Devereaux must ultimately deal with the problem through the courts, where his frontier justice is shown to be brutal and no longer acceptable to a community investing in the kind of law and order established by government institutions. During the course of the trial Devereaux's lynching of cattle thieves also comes to light:

Van Cleve: I now ask you, sir, do you remember the names Charlie Monger, Red Dog Johnson or Carlos Rameriez?

Matt Devereaux: No.

Van Cleve: The incident may be too trivial to recall. But isn't it true that you summarily hanged three of these men on the afternoon of June 4th?

Matt Devereaux: They were stealing my cattle!

Van Cleve: I thought you didn't remember them.

Matt Devereaux: I didn't ask their names!

Van Cleve: You just hanged 'em?

Matt Devereaux: By the neck until they were dead. They were thieves!

Devereaux's acts of barbarism cannot be sanctioned: as with Lear, his dogged fidelity to an older code of ethics cannot be sustained. The constantly conflicting values conventionally associated with the western, as a genre of order, create a film world in which there can never be a stable milieu. There is a sense of radical instability operating at a literal and an ideological level in both *Broken Lance* and *King Lear*, but in Shakespeare's play there is also an innate sense of textual instability, a purposeful denial of assured interpretive positions which generates a more complex, less definitive hero.

Through his exploration of the corruption and prejudice at the core of this newly established, superficially more cultured and civilized society, Dmytryk challenges its stability both within its historical cinematic context and that of his contemporary America - an America which blacklisted him, hauling him before the House of Un-American Activities Committee. Devereaux's lynching of cattle thieves associates him with acts of savagery but his attitude towards the Native American Indian and to the land itself is less barbaric than that of the supposedly 'civilised' government and its representatives. Married to a Comanche who becomes the film's voice of reason and compassion, and father of a mixed race son who emerges as the only male with any sustainable sense of honour,

Devereaux stands against the prejudiced values and corrupt ethos of his society. Whilst Lear must acquire a social conscience by treading a redemptive path, Devereaux is constructed as a hero with a ready-made conscience; his fair treatment of impoverished Indians found stealing his cattle demonstrates his humanity though as a frontier man he remains inextricably implicated in the displacement of the Native American Indian despite this or his pledged allegiance to his Comanche wife and to the well-being of the land which he tries to protect from contamination. His spiritual connection with the land is inferred throughout, his image being cinematically intertwined with the lone wolf that not only haunts the film's landscape shots but forms the focus of the final frame, aligning Devereaux with the land and its permanence.



2.15 *Broken Lance* (1954)

Yet neither Devereaux nor Lear re-emerge as the leaders of the communities they have laboured to create: Devereaux may be an enlightened man of savage leanings and Lear may be a repentant sinner but the worlds they represent no longer exist. Dmytryk's *Broken Lance* is an elegy to the dying of the west; Shakespeare's *King*

Lear is an elegy to the demise of patriarchal power: each text in its own way explores the deconstruction of a particular brand of macho honour and maps the disintegration of masculinity as that power and identity inevitably subsides.

Yordan's story presents us with an exposé of prejudice; the narrative is filtered through Devereaux's mixed race son, Joe, and the closing moments focus on Joe's departure from the prejudiced lands his father helped to 'tame'. A romantic Hollywood style closure is ensured through the union of Joe and the governor's daughter; they drive off not on horseback but in a horsedrawn buggy, Joe having relinquished his former cowboy image. His dramatic act of breaking the lance adorning Devereaux's grave and replacing it with flowers symbolises the end of his affiliation with the violence of the western frontier as does his leave-taking with the Eastern educated Barbara who becomes synonymous with yet another 'new world' in which prejudice plays no part.



2.16 *Broken Lance* (1954)

However, despite being confined by expected Hollywood closure Dmytryk's film leaves us with an overall sense of this world's instability and little faith in the

notion that ‘half-breed’ Joe and his partner will escape society’s prejudice given that it is a continuing presence in the fifties America of the film’s production era. Just as the close of Shakespeare’s tragedy leaves us with a feeling that the re-established order is precarious, any sense of equilibrium in this frontier landscape remains tentative. The “strong lance of justice” (4.6:162) still breaks, especially when it is associated with the kind of ‘gold-plated sin’ epitomised by the new orders which prevail in both Lear’s and Devereaux’s world. Whilst the western may resemble the heritage genre so often employed by adapters of Shakespeare to screen in terms of its mythical qualities, in *this* instance its mythical properties do not become synonymous with the kind of collective nostalgia we associate with heritage cinema. According to Andrew Higson heritage cinema is overwhelmed by its nostalgic preoccupation with the past, which in turn serves to undermine the social critiques and ironies embedded in the source texts that heritage films are adapted from: they wallow instead in a visual aesthetic that romanticises the past to the extent that the social criticism at the core of the narrative is subsumed.¹⁶ The writers and director of *Broken Lance* ensure that their own ideological concerns are not overwhelmed by either the nostalgic propensities of the western genre or its formulaic demands by incorporating a critique of social issues of pertinence to its US contemporary production climate, and in so doing they create connections with the social critiques embedded in Shakespeare’s play. The film mirrors Shakespeare’s *King Lear* at an ideological and a thematic level: each text explores issues of identity related to personal, familial and societal disintegration, presenting a violent yet melancholic elegy to the passing of a particular kind of existence.

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- ¹ Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh, 2005), p.57.
- ² Ibid., p.56.
- ³ Tony Howard, "Shakespeare's Cinematic Offshoots," *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000).
- ⁴ Robert F. Willson Jr., *Shakespeare in Hollywood: 1929 – 1956* (New Jersey, 2000), pp. 115-122.
- ⁵ Thomas Schatz, "Hollywood Genres: Film Genre and Genre Film," *Film Theory and Criticism* (Sixth Edition), eds. Leo Braudy and Martin Cohen (Oxford, 2004), p.698
- ⁶ Ibid., pp.697-698.
- ⁷ Ibid., pp.697-698.
- ⁸ Tony Howard, p.297.
- ⁹ Ibid., p.298.
- ¹⁰ Langford, p.62.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p.62.
- ¹² Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London, 1969), p.11.
- ¹³ Langford, p.65.
- ¹⁴ Schatz, p.696.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p.695.
- ¹⁶ Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford, 1995), p.109.

2.6 Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985)

2.6 (i) Chaos on the Western Frontier

Kurosawa's *Ran* has been legitimised by Western scholarship; its place within the 'canon' of Shakespeare on screen is secure. However, critical debate surrounding the film is driven by a desire to prove the 'unquestionable' parallels between *Ran* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, leading to a disturbing diminishment of not only the cultural and the aesthetic worth of the film but to a negation of its intertextual strengths. In its pursuit of an auteurist reading of *Ran* – a reading which serves to legitimise its place within the canon - existing scholarly debate omits consideration of the film as a highly successful work of *genre* cinema; indebted as much to Eastern and Western generic film practices as it is to Shakespeare's play, its origins lie with Eastern legend rather than the myths that Westerners associate with the *Lear* narrative. Instead of seeking to prove *Ran*'s debt to Shakespeare, debate should centre on Akira Kurosawa's inventive intertextualisation.

Kurosawa melds the literature of East and West, the film genres of the *jidai-geki* epic and the mainstream western, the cultural and stylistic motifs of Japanese cinema and theatre with the codes and conventions of Hollywood to create an autonomous work of cinematic art which continues to connect with a global film audience.

According to film academic Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, Shakespeare's play functions here as "objectified cultural capital" which is appropriated by Kurosawa to form a "new cultural product." Yet the film text is denied autonomy regardless of its independent "aesthetic value:"¹ it remains dependent upon the 'original' in the eyes of Western Film and Shakespeare Criticism, and is thus trapped by a discourse of adaptation that valorizes what is seen as its Shakespearean source

text. Yoshimoto argues that when Eastern texts are reappropriated by the West, the “subjectivity of the West does not go through fundamental change or transformation” and “the acquisition” of the Eastern text is merely a “process of changing the ownership.”² One only has to look at the plethora of films currently hijacking Eastern mythologies and cultural reference points to see the validity of his argument: when plundering Eastern cinema, Western directors like Quentin Tarantino and Martin Scorsese unashamedly reappropriate the ‘cultural capital’ of other nations, turning the source into their own Americanised product, and claiming merely an homage to the Eastern source. Conversely, ‘Shakespeare’ remains emblematic of Western cultural superiority, and is never assimilated to such an extent that it is subsumed by the adaptation, no matter how tentative the connection. We are undoubtedly left with a sense that the Japanese product remains ostensibly a ‘Western’ text, denying any independent sense of nationhood within cinema that works at the level of Shakespearean adaptation, even if conceived and filmed in the language of the indigenous population. James Goodwin argues that rather than being seen as an adaptation *Ran* should be viewed as an intertext, “intelligible in terms of other texts that it cites or reiterates, revises and transforms.”³ To consider Kurosawa’s film as intertext as opposed to adaptation not only enables us to avoid the kind of hierarchical placement of one source or one culture above another but also underlines the inherent plurality of all ‘texts’ contributing to its realisation.

Ran has, however, remained the property of decades of Western scholarship, acclaimed as part of a *Shakespearean* heritage of global proportions, regardless of Kurosawa’s contention that its initial sources come from Japanese

histories, mythologies and theatrical practices rather than the Shakespearean source it is so readily identified with:

I had the idea about writing something about the sixteenth-century Japanese war lord Mori Motonari, who had three sons. And having written an outline of the script, it suddenly occurred to me that it was very similar to *King Lear*, so I went back to read it again, and developed it from there. Motonari had three very good sons, so I started thinking about what would have happened if they hadn't been loyal, and developed a fiction around the actual character.⁴

Written in collaboration with Hideo Oguni and Masato Ide, the screenplay and resulting film are based on a desire to invert the Montonari legend and contain innumerable references to Japanese culture; yet Western academics persist in the assertion that it is first and foremost a version of a Shakespeare play, some seeing it as a paradoxical contradiction that Kurosawa would deny it is a direct adaptation of *King Lear*.⁵ In his approach to the film, Kurosawa consciously adopts the theatrical conventions of Noh theatre which provide not only a structural framework for his narrative by establishing the “patterns of polarity and disparity”⁶ associated with this form but also a stylistic template which embodies the form’s aesthetic ideal of “simplicity-as-complexity.”⁷ The dichotomies which operate at the root of Noh theatre are employed at a visual level, leading to the construction of images of abstract simplicity, and frames infused with an astonishing sense of symmetry. John Collick claims that, due to the benshi’s influence on the evolution of Japanese cinema, the Japanese filmmaker and his Japanese audience is trained to ‘read’ film “as a collection of symbolic images” rather than as a medium which should be “passively experienced as a transparent

window on the real world,”⁸ posing a very different viewing experience for Kurosawa’s Eastern and Western audiences. From its advent, Japanese cinema has been associated with a performance mode which construes film as an artificial construct: the use of a visible narrator, employing the symbolic gestures of the Bunraku puppet theatre reinforced the medium’s artificiality, distancing the viewer emotionally from the performances in a way that remains alien to Western viewing experience in all but the most consciously ‘art house’ cinematic experience.

And yet, Kurosawa’s films retain a populist Western appeal that challenges their definition as ‘art house’ cinema. His painterly style is a by-product of Japanese cultural influences as opposed to a sign of his anti-genre leanings. *Ran*’s narrative deals in archetypal characters and follows a classic story design rather than the non-linear narrative patterning and psychological preoccupations associated with ‘art house’ films; and despite the highly stylised, painterly nature of its images, its deployment of visual, structural and ideological motifs readily associated with the western genre ensures its accessibility to a global mainstream audience. Kenneth Rothwell may argue that *Ran* is “that rare thing, a reasonably well-funded art movie” having secured a 10.5 million budget from Serge Silberman - “a generous patron of the art movie”⁹ - but it owes its commercial success to its affiliations with the mainstream western genre. The eighties work of fellow director Shohei Imamura reflects a similar tendency to preserve elements of Japanese culture whilst simultaneously ‘borrowing’ elements from Western cinema: his first period film, *Eijomaika* (1981), and *Narayama Bushiko* (1983), his meditation on the nature of existence and death in a bygone Japanese era, share with the contemporaneous *Ran* a preoccupation with a past firmly rooted in

Japanese culture. But whilst Shohei Imamura's projects secured home-grown funding, Kurosawa's ventures in the eighties were dependent upon overseas funding; as a result of some disastrous box-office failures in the seventies, Kurosawa was reliant upon American financial backing from Frances Ford Coppola and George Lucas for his film *Kagemashu* (1980), whilst *Ran* was dependent upon Serge Silberman's French funding. Other Japanese directors working in the eighties were also reliant upon overseas funding but, whereas Kurosawa's film-making is consistently informed by a decidedly Japanese aesthetic, despite the overseas funding of his eighties films, some Japanese filmmakers moved towards a distinctly European form of expression. The work of directors like Nagisa Oshima (*Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, 1983; *Max, Mon Amour*, 1986) moved into European territory, not only becoming reliant upon Western financial backing but also displaying a more Westernised aesthetic.

Unlike Western adapters of Shakespeare's plays, Kurosawa can appropriate ideas and images from *King Lear* without being hindered by concerns for the 'sanctity' of Shakespeare's verse; according to Anthony Davies, writers like Kurosawa and Grigori Kozintsev were not "burdened with any sense that in making films they were reducing the impact of Shakespeare's dialogue and theatricality in its original language,"¹⁰ suggesting that to be free from the constraints of the language can be, for film-maker and adapter, a very positive force. For a director like Kurosawa, who is renowned for his distrust of the spoken word, such freedoms offer the opportunity to realise the essence of the Shakespearean text and the Eastern narratives it engages with in other, much more cinematically visual ways; by exploring the spatial dimensions of the screen image dialogue becomes almost redundant. His dependence upon visual and aural

signifiers, as opposed to verbal signifiers, is in part realised by his use of Noh theatrical conventions and the spatial dimensions associated with that dramatic form, but it is also a reflection of the Japanese aesthetic which Burch characterises as being part of Eastern cinema's dominant 'presentational' mode as opposed to Western cinema's 'representational' mode.¹¹ And *Ran* is a film that is striking in a visual sense, so much so that reviewers have often been critical of the film as a consequence, seeing Kurosawa's attention to the visual beauty and sophistication of the on-screen image as a detraction from its potential psychological energy. Peter Ackroyd, writing for *The Spectator*, claimed that *Ran* is "Shakespeare drained of its poetry, stripped of its human dimensions, and forced within a schematic framework derived from quite different attitudes and preoccupations."¹² Such a reading speaks volumes about the way in which the majority of Western reviewers and academics alike take up a viewing position defined by what Yoshimoto terms "the politics of cultural traffic"¹³ in which West is best and there is little if any acknowledgement that *Ran* is, in fact, an Eastern cultural product with its own specifically Japanese cultural capital.

Whether we view Kurosawa as one who adapts or one who appropriates *King Lear* as an intertextual reference point, the blending of elements of the Eastern and the Western aesthetic results in a uniquely 'staged' piece of cinema. However, Kurosawa's relationship with both Western and Japanese cinema remains ambivalent. Although credited with bringing Western critical acclaim to Japanese cinema and an affirmation of its status as a national cinema, Kurosawa has at times found himself criticised for attracting such Western enthusiasm. Despite his proclaimed commitment to Japanese culture, he is often regarded by Japanese critics as a filmmaker overly concerned with creating images which are

accessible to a Western eye rather than being true to their Eastern origins; conversely, some Western critics argue that Kurosawa's exposure to a Western aesthetic has not taken him away from his fundamentally Japanese roots.¹⁴ But what is sorely lacking from such rigid critical 'positioning' is any acknowledgement of the cross-cultural strengths of Kurosawa's work in general and of *Ran* in particular: *Ran* functions as a distinctly Japanese film product with undeniably Western affiliations, not least through its appropriation of the ideological premise underpinning the mainstream western genre. Although working through a Japanese aesthetic, Kurosawa's global acceptance is in part due to his capacity to imbibe elements of Western film practice, especially in relation to his samurai epics. Kurosawa's earlier samurai film, *Shichinin no Samurai* (1954), pre-empted many of the thematic concerns explored in his later samurai films, including *Kumonosu Jo* (1957), *Yojimbo* (1961), *Kagemusha* (1980) and *Ran*: all embody Kurosawa's preoccupation with the transience of the samurai warrior and the codes and conventions by which he lives, and most explore the samurai's relationship with the land. Yet his archetypal 'heroes' - like the heroes of Shakespeare's tragedies - remain far more problematic and complex than their Hollywood counterparts. Contrary to Yoshimoto's claims that Eastern film products are *always* subsumed by Western appropriation, remakes of Kurosawa's samurai films - *Shichinin no Samurai* is reincarnated as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *Yojimbo* as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) - remain indebted to their Japanese forerunners and are invariably referred to as remakes of Kurosawa classics. But what is most intriguing here is the cultural and ideological cross-fertilisation between these historically and geographically specific samurai films and their genre-specific western counterparts. In *Ran* Kurosawa exploits

such cross-fertilisation, creating a film text which deconstructs not only the myth of the samurai but the parallel frontier myths explored in Hollywood's western genre.

Although *Ran* operates within the realms of the costume drama, unlike heritage reworkings of Shakespeare's plays it does not become merely an exercise in visual excess; neither does it establish a flawed construct of Japanese national identity founded on a romanticised historical viewpoint. Instead, Kurosawa's work showcases the ways in which, through manipulation of past motifs, ranging here from samurai codes to the cinematic conventions of the western, and from Eastern legends to the Ur texts of Western culture, *genre* creativity can result in the deconstruction of flawed national identity. By employing the Jidai-geki genre, which is associated with glorification of the samurai and its very masculine code, Kurosawa proceeds to illuminate not only the flaws within the code but the redundancy of its 'heroes', disrupting viewing expectations of Western and Eastern audiences. Set in a culturally and historically specific sixteenth century feudal Japan, during an era known as the Sengoku Jidai and peopled by samurai warriors and war lords, it plays with the conventions of Jidai-geki, subverting audience expectations by challenging the conventional notions of heroism and loyalty associated with the very Japanese values of the samurai. From the position of social historian, Collick argues that contrary to Western perceptions of samurai honour and obligation, betrayal was an intrinsic part of feudal Japan, the master-servant relationship being far from stable, and the extermination of a lord by one of his own ambitious samurai not uncommon.¹⁵ The flawed myth of samurai honour and might, perpetuated by the Jidai-geki genre, is exposed in *Ran*: there are no effective, mythical heroes.

Hidetora is constructed as the archetypal western hero; he is, in Schatz's genre terminology, "psychologically static," the "physical embodiment of an attitude, a style, a world view of a predetermined and essentially unchanging cultural posture."¹⁶ Unlike Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Hidetora does not seek redemption and his 'heroic' deeds remain questionable, devoid of any motivation other than a lust for power; he is not "a man more sinned against than sinning" (3.2:58-59). He has little to say about self-discovery, with such speeches as "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (1.4:221) - speeches indicative of moments of inner-reflection – finding no place in Kurosawa's screenplay, and he retains the isolated, distanced stance of the western hero. His conflicts are externalised and we are given no insight into the psychological turmoil triggered by his abuse at the hands of his sons. Such externalisation of conflict is again more reflective of the western genre of mainstream cinema than of the tragic conventions we associate with the Western stage. Indeed, Yoshiko Ueno claims that the whole concept of personal tragedy is alien to Japanese culture since "the search for individual identity, which is usually assumed to be a major focus of *King Lear*, is alien to Japanese thought."¹⁷ In *Ran* there is no sense of the redemptive heroic sacrifice which we have come to associate with Western tragedy. Those invested with a sense of the heroic die: Saburo and Sué are eliminated and we sense that the feuding will continue with Lords Fujimaki and Ayabe simply taking over from the Ichimonji clan. The samurai as a social community emerge as a decidedly unheroic collective, devoid of principled heroes: both Taro and Jiro are constructed as self-serving males who allow themselves to be manipulated by Lady Kaede; and Kurogane's attempts to restore samurai honour by slaying the

treacherous Kaede are undermined by our prior knowledge of his own dishonourable acts, not least his cowardly killing of an unsuspecting Taro.

Despite her diminished position as a woman in a feudal Japan, Kaede, unlike the men around her, emerges as a character able to retain her own codes of honour and family loyalty. She operates within the confines of her social position as a seemingly powerless woman in a feudal Japan and yet she is the perpetrator of horrendous acts of violence which ultimately lead to her planned disintegration of the Ichimonji clan and the samurai code. Unlike the more conservative western adapters of fifties Hollywood, Kurosawa 's intertextual referencing of the Lear story line utilises the concept of powerful, demonised womanhood. Kaede embodies the histories of demonised woman in Japanese folklore and theatre;¹⁸ but Kurosawa skilfully intertwines this with allusions to demonised womanhood at the core of Western mythologies via visual references to the serpent as iconic of woman as temptress in both cultures. Her persona is also invested with elements of the archetypal monster of the horror genre. Her seduction of Jiro plays with horror conventions: elements of the sexually predatory vampire are embodied in the seduction sequence as her "penetrating mouth", biting and licking blood, becomes what horror critic Darryl Jones terms a "displaced version of the familiar phobic image of the vagina dentata, simultaneously enveloping and castrating."¹⁹ Contrary to cinematic conventions, Jiro becomes the feminised focal point of the camera's gaze and Kaede becomes what Barbara Creed terms the "monstrous-feminine,"²⁰ challenging accepted notions of femininity which, by definition, equate with passivity.



2.17 *Ran* (1985)

Actively performing the role of castrator, Kaede usurps the male position, wielding Jiro's knife as part of her sado-masochistic foreplay and orchestrating the downfall of the Ichimonji clan through her manipulation of its supposedly 'heroic' samurai lords.



2.18 *Ran* (1985)



2.19 *Ran* (1985)

Through allusion to the topographical and iconographic signifiers of the western Kurosawa creates a film world in which questions of honour and loyalty are played out against a backdrop of epic proportions, and in which violence and conflict are the norm. If we view Kurosawa's *Ran* as a pseudo-western, the text can be classified as belonging to the genre of order or determinate space in a structural, an ideological and a thematic sense. Therefore, as with the western, *Ran*'s sense of 'place' is pivotal: its ideologically contested setting becomes of central importance, the rugged landscape forming a "symbolic arena of action"²¹ similar to that of the western's frontier plains within which conflict persists in the absence of a stable milieu. The vast landscape is foregrounded by Kurosawa and its brooding presence becomes part of the film's fabric - a constant situated at the edges of the frame, seemingly 'tamed' by the might of the samurai warlord Hidetora Motonari yet threatening always to engulf humankind and its 'civilising' influence.



2.20 *Ran* (1985)

Contrary to popular belief, Robert Warshow argues that the landscapes of the western serve to diminish the stature of the western hero.²² In much the same way, the samurai is invariably pitted against a frontier-like landscape in Kurosawa's *Ran*, highlighting their fragility and that of their value system throughout the narrative. Rather than providing an expansive backdrop against which the heroic deeds of the protagonists are measured, Kurosawa's Mount Fuji location overwhelms the samurai warriors: their presence is conveyed as transient and inconsequential in comparison to the grandeur of their natural surroundings. In the absence of firmly established 'frontier' or samurai codes of conduct alike, the precarious stability such codes help to maintain dissipates and the cult of masculinity which underpins them disintegrates. The heroic stature of warlord Hidetora is undermined continually as he, like the archetypal heroes of mainstream westerns, tries to renegotiate his position within this unstable world; having maintained control through his violent, despotic leadership, he is unable to see that to relinquish his control will unleash anarchy.

The film's ideologically contested space, in which territorial conflicts are an historical given, becomes a site of violent social disintegration on a par with the societal disintegration found in westerns in general and *King Lear* in particular. In Kurosawa's realisation of a feudal Japan the 'values' of the samurai are in flux: the landscape may have been 'tamed' by Motonari and a social *order* established, but his capacity to hold back the 'wilderness' which threatens to engulf his world at any moment is limited, and forms the narrative momentum of the film. Despite Kurosawa's reputation for creating what are regarded as very masculine films, in *Ran* it is this disintegration of masculinity and patriarchal institutions which provides the narrative focus, and it is in this respect that Kurosawa's film connects with Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the dramatic exploration of the demise of patriarchy underpinning each text's ideological and thematic preoccupations. Furthermore, Kurosawa draws parallels between his potentially anarchic feudal setting and the western frontier, and in so doing deconstructs the cult of masculinity at the core of both genres. His film offers a social critique of patriarchal systems across a range of genres, from Japanese Jidai-geki epic to Renaissance tragedy, to Hollywood western, linking the concerns embedded in Shakespeare's play with those of other historical eras, other nations, other mythologies.

2.6 (ii) A Question of Identity: an illustrative analysis of the opening sequences

The opening moments of the film serve to illustrate the very tenuous nature of samurai power, positioning the warriors against the backdrop of a landscape which totally overwhelms them, dwarfing them within the frame. Despite the

openness and fertility of the surrounding landscape, we sense the discomfort of those held within the frame; the four armed riders, meticulously positioned to enhance the symmetry of the shot as they look out to the four points of a compass, remain unnaturally still. Diegetic sound is eliminated from what should be a very naturalistic moment and is replaced by a sound track reminiscent of the horror genre, its high-pitched strings jarring with the serenity of the landscape, enhancing the sense of discomfort experienced by riders and audience.



2.21 *Ran* (1987)

In the series of shots that follows, Kurosawa's attention to the visual balance of each frame remains a stylistic feature: we see three different riders positioned in a line against the backdrop of the mountains, followed by a shot that encompasses five of the riders, again symmetrically placed in a hierarchical formation, again each holding a static pose, the gaze of all riders looking out in the same direction.

At this point all sound is eliminated, adding to the tension within the scene and creating a feeling of unsettling inertia that clashes with our expectations of the

macho figures held within the camera's gaze. Even though their masculinity is signalled through costuming and their appearance in masculine pose on horseback, their stillness and anxiety is at odds with the proactive preconceptions we hold of the samurai warrior or of their heroic western counterparts. They are constructed as an anonymous alien presence, impinging upon a landscape established in the opening moments as a brooding entity which will remain throughout the film. A further three frames are similarly concerned with the diametric positioning of those in shot, Kurosawa's attention to detail presenting us with a canvas that is meticulously constructed to the extent that each riders' bow is drawn and held at the edges of the frame in almost perfect alignment.



2.22 *Ran* (1987)

Kurosawa creates a tenuous symmetry within the opening shots, visually demonstrating the fragility of each frames' balance and in so doing inferring a similarly fragile image of masculinity. The suggestion that each frame can be so easily disturbed - by a sound, by a movement - is analogous to his construction of masculinity; a masculinity that holds on to power by futile attempts to order the

chaos through codes and conventions which, as in the frontier landscapes of the western, cannot be sustained. Through the very staged nature of the opening frames, reflective of the visual simplicity of Noh theatrical conventions, Kurosawa foregrounds the notion that man's attempts to order the chaos cannot succeed and, moreover, that masculinity is a construct which can easily be *deconstructed*. The final image within the sequence leaves us with the kind of wide angled panoramic landscape shot we have come to associate with the western. The human figures appear as miniscule, inconsequential blemishes on the canvas of the landscape, uncomfortably pre-empting the film's bleak closing sequence in which the masculine samurai warriors are replaced by the lone figure of the emasculated Tsurumaru who, though visibly their antithesis, shares with them a vulnerability signalled by the sheer dimensions of the natural world that overwhelms them.

It is against this iconic backdrop, reminiscent of the western plains, that we are given our first glimpse of Hidetora, the first of the figures seen on screen to be invested with any detailed representation. The stillness of the previous sequence abruptly ends as the moving camera tracks a wild boar; the naturalistic diegetic sounds of the boar breathing and the grass rustling disturb the inertia of the previous frame, bringing us back to the real world held within the camera's lens and momentarily altering our position as spectators. Rather than viewing the scene from the distanced stand-point of the establishing shots, we are brought down to the boar's eye level in a rare point of view shot, the boar centrally placed front of camera, situating us as spectators with the hunted animal. From the powerless position of those who watch and wait, the warriors now emerge into the shot from below our sight-line, the embodiment of masculinity and physical aggression, subverting the expectations Kurosawa establishes in the opening

frames in which they appear to be the hunted rather than the hunters, and yet again setting up parallels with what is to come: the hunter Hidetora ultimately becomes the hunted despite his warrior-like stance as he first enters this sequence in dynamic hunting pose, commandeering the screen with his presence whilst the camera tracks his pursuit of the boar, and visually conveying his prowess through the magnificence of his costume and his unrivalled horsemanship, both of which set him apart from the other warriors who have remained faceless thus far. He is clearly the most imposing hunter, held as he is in the camera's gaze as he draws back his bow to shoot the boar; a swift edit to the film's title, *Ran*, further underlines Hidetora's central role within the narrative, creating a visual shorthand that immediately associates him with the chaos and violent disorder that ensues.



2.23 *Ran* (1987)

'civilization' outlined by Kites as essential to the ideological framework of the western genre.²³ Any sense of order remains transitory - a mere nod to the

We move to a very staged scene in which we see war lord Hidetora imposing order on the vastness of the landscape that surrounds him; three tented areas are erected, the black and gold of Hidetora's insignia taking centre stage and

providing limited shelter from the open, natural spaces that seem to engulf them. The attempted domestication of the landscape is strikingly at odds with the surroundings, and the fragility of the structures erected to signify Hidetora's control and place within the hierarchy of politics and family again lead us to question the stability of each. We are not presented with an image of the war lord Hidetora framed by the might of the castles he has constructed or acquired during his reign, but by the flimsy canvas structures he has erected to mark out his territorial authority and dominance.



2.24 *Ran* (1987)

The transitory nature of the image presents us with a visual realisation of the ambivalent relationship between the binary oppositions of 'wilderness' and 'civilization' outlined by Kites as essential to the ideological framework of the western genre.²³ Any sense of order remains transitory - a mere nod to the 'taming' of the 'wilderness.'

Even when we cut to the more substantial images of Hidetora's castles, these man-made fortresses seem inconsequential when framed against the backdrop of the plains they are perched precariously upon. Each of the subsequent frames is constructed to echo the symmetry of the opening sequence; hierarchy is mapped out and imposed via the spatial relationships. Hidetora is placed centrally within the frame at the apex of power, his sons, in order of their birth right ranged left of screen, with Saburo's prospective fathers-in-law positioned on the opposite side. As viewers we seem initially to peer over the edges of the erected canvas, as if looking at a stage rather than a screen space, our 'looking' held at a distance; and as the dialogue begins, we retain this distanced position, the whole scene being devoid of the conventional shot-reverse-shot framing of mainstream cinema, investing the scene with a ceremonial and theatrical energy that maintains our emotional distance. Hidetora's mask-like appearance and sumptuous costumes lend his figure a regal air; he is first and foremost a powerful war lord rather than a doting father, much as King Lear is constructed firstly as a powerful monarch and secondly as a man who craves outward shows of affection from his children. But as with King Lear, Hidetora's regal mask slips to reveal the vulnerable, and needy old man; although seated at the apex of the power triangle, he dozes, presenting a direct contrast to the opening image of the hunter Hidetora and leading us to question the stability of the power construct we are presented with.

Perceptions of order are compounded by use of the primary colour coding employed to identify each son; from this point onwards Taro is associated, visually, with yellow, Jiro with red and Saburo with blue. Their names further serve to reiterate the clear delineation of place within the family and the political hierarchy, Taro meaning first son, Jiro second son and Saburo, third son. But it is

not until they are seen in relation to their father that they are invested with any individual identity, limited as this is by such coded simplicity and dictated by Kurosawa's desire to present us with a depiction of 'family' preordained by hierarchical preoccupations. Unlike King Lear, Hidetora has always intended to pass control to his first born son, regardless of any preference he may feel for the youngest child; Hidetora's 'loyalty' to the hierarchical code is not in question. Kurosawa's inverted re-enactment of the Motonari tale, in which he examines what would happen if Motonari's sons were to prove disloyal, provides a visual shorthand for the oncoming chaos that will form the narrative momentum of the film. Saburo quite rightly foresees the chaos and violent disorder that will not only consume the world of the samurai but also the tenuous loyalties at the heart of the Ichimonji family should Hidetora's control be relinquished. It is the warrior pose of Hidetora, established during our first glimpse of him, that must be maintained if the chaos of the title is to be contained. However, Howlett suggests that Hidetora feels trapped "in a rigid system of samurai identity" from which he wants to escape, and cites his frantic desire to quit the tented enclosure he has created, after experiencing a nightmare vision of his own isolation within it, as proof of his subconscious intent.²⁴ But his 'tragedy' ensues when he tries to realise his desire to become other than the distanced hero upholding a certain code of ethics in a morally volatile world. Hidetora can only "mediate the forces of order and anarchy"²⁵ which typify the contested spaces of both a feudal Japan and the unruly frontier when he maintains his position of relative separation.

Issues related to the disintegration of identity are explored via the concept of failed - or failing - patriarchy in *King Lear*, *Ran* and the western genre, and in each there remains an inescapable element of wish-fulfilment to the demise of the

paternal figurehead. Signs of Hidetora's weakness and offered tenderesses in the sequence are rejected by Saburo since he sees Hidetora's identity as war lord and leader of the Ichimonji clan as being of far more import than his desire to change his role to that of doting, dependent father – a role which has no place within the conventions of a feudal samurai Japan and one which, given Hidetora's past, he is destined to find almost impossible to sustain. By publicly relinquishing control Hidetora is relinquishing his masculinity, redefining his identity and thus amplifying the vulnerability of those who live by the samurai code: his actions ensure not only his own demise but that of the samurai. When Saburo states "We too are children of this age, reared on strife and chaos," he clarifies the position of the samurai warrior who must battle to ensure order, to maintain the masculinity at the heart of the samurai code, or face its extinction. Even when 'playing' the role of benevolent father, through Kurosawa's distancing of the spectator and the continued absence of reaction shots, close ups and shot-reverse-shot sequences, Hidetora's emotional credibility remains circumspect, especially when coupled with a performance mode that is highly theatrical and stylised, and spatial positioning which highlights the formal nature of relationships. This new identity constitutes a fragile construct, as vulnerable and exposed as the image of the riders who form part of the opening tableau.

Despite the warrior-like pose held by Hidetora as he first enters the frame, there are subtle indications that his masculine image will be continually undermined during the course of the narrative; the subsequent recurring shots in which Hidetora is framed in doorways and through windows are more readily associated with the ways in which women are framed on film.²⁶ Within the formal tented enclosure, Kurosawa constructs an image of Hidetora as the majestic,

tyrannical old man of Noh theatrical conventions, his face painted with the mask-like properties of the Akujo;²⁷ he is clearly the intended focus of our gaze, his masked appearance contrasting with the naturalism of the other faces within the frame and his opulent costuming overpowering the primary colours of his sons and the black and white costuming of Ayabe and Fujimaki, visually setting him apart. As with later shots of Hidetora in doorways and through windows, we see his face in this formal moment framed by his headgear, its symmetrical lines holding his face for the camera's gaze, again suggesting a shot composition more often employed when suspending an image of the female form.



2.25 *Ran* (1987)

His only rival for cinematic attention in these opening scenes is Kyoami whose vibrant costuming, appearance and performance mode all project an image of femininity at odds with the masculinity of those who surround him. Coupled with the implications of casting a popular Japanese transvestite star in this role, Kurosawa's intention to explore gender ambiguities and to further undermine constructs of masculinity come into focus. Kyoami is, by the very nature of his

role, a marginalised character as is further implied by his placement on the edges of the frame. Kurosawa destabilizes gendered identity, maintaining through his use of distinctly Japanese references - Kyoami taking on the role of the Kyogen actor from Noh theatre whilst Tsumuramu embodies its ghost figures through use of the Yoroboshi mask²⁸ - similar complications to those presented in Elizabethan times by Shakespeare's imposed use of boy actors, essentially in drag, for the central roles of Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. The closing image of Tsumuramu is reminiscent of the historical framing of women, placed against what Rutter refers to as a 'poetically expressionistic' background,²⁹ and it is significant that Kurosawa chooses to leave us with this image of the effeminate and helpless Tsumuramu rather than any embodiment of samurai power and masculinity.

By this stage, the heroic have been eliminated in moments which are cinematically inconsequential, Saburo being unceremoniously shot as he rides with the rescued Hidetora, his death momentarily passing unmarked. Those who have adhered only to the violence of the samurai code have suffered a similar end, Taro, like Saburo being shot not during the onslaught of battle but during a shockingly quiet moment. There are no heroic confrontations in which the might of the samurai is foregrounded; indeed, the only shot which sustains a heroic image of samurai warriors on horseback comes as Saburo's troops vacate the Third Castle, the blue and white plumes of the riders dominating the screen from a low angle shot. Even so, they are seen leaving rather than holding their position. Saburo is physically aligned with the regenerative attributes of the natural world and is seen only within the open spaces of that natural world throughout the film; yet, despite his good intentions and his visual affinity with nature, he is unable to realise the role of masculine hero, suggesting that Kurosawa is again asking us to

contemplate the inefficacy of masculinity and the patriarchal systems on which it is inherently dependent. It is the emasculated Kyoami who remains as protector of Hidetora during the course of the narrative, leading us to question the roles of sons and samurais.

Howlett sees Kurosawa's cinematic representation in this film as one that "opposes the *acceptable* transvestite to the destructive and threatening *male* female,"³⁰ the latter being guilty of disrupting the hierarchical order on which both the samurai code and relationships within the patriarchal 'family' are dependent. The very absence of women in the opening moments of the film and the violent end for both Kaede *and* Sué seem to validate her claims. Whilst Kurosawa's presentation of an all-male gathering is preordained by the fact that he is creating a fiction from the male-dominated Motonari narrative, situated in a feudal Japan, the total absence of women in the opening moments also allows for a striking contrast between the uneasy and transitory order established in Hidetora's initial gathering and what follows as the first of Kurosawa's female constructs enters the screen space. We move to a low angle shot of Hidetora's First Castle, one of many such shots designed to signify his power and status. The seeming dominance of such man-made structures within the natural landscape is, however, undermined by the deliberate inclusion of rolling clouds in the background of the frame, visually reminding us of the presence of a natural order that is constantly unnerving and capable of disrupting male power through its capacity to overwhelm as indicated in the establishing shots of the film.

However, unlike her male counterparts, Kaede's on-screen presence carries none of the anxieties to be found in the film's opening frames, despite her containment within a domesticated space. She emerges as the archetypal villain of

the piece but her monstrous behaviour is given a backstory which allows us to empathise with her. As we cut to a high angle shot of Kaede and her retinue within the castle walls, her sense of composure is immediately communicated. Movement is minimal and measured, the accompanying prophetic drumbeat which signals the oncoming confrontation giving way to the diegetic sound of Kaede's shoes on gravel, and reminding us at an iconic level of the status of woman in feudal Japan, her feet bound and confined. Echoes of the western showdown reverberate throughout the scene: clinking spurs are replaced by shuffling shoes and the silences of a windswept western outpost are mirrored by eerie silence within the castle walls. Kaede, like Hidetora, retains a mask-like appearance, her face starkly white, and is costumed in a similarly opulent manner. As we cut to a high angle shot we see the very staged and strikingly symmetrical nature of the moment, two converging paths about to be approached by two processions, held as if in a theatrical freeze-frame, suspending screen time as the confrontation is about to ensue and thus signalling the significance of what may seem a relatively minor moment.



2.26 *Ran* (1987)

Yet this 'minor' moment is central to our understanding of Kaede since it establishes her as a powerful player who is, in direct contrast to Hidetora, capable of asserting her control over the spaces she inhabits. Hidetora is reduced to the role of passive onlooker during this scene, framed by the window he peers out of, his inert image held again in the camera's gaze in a shot usually reserved for the female form. As we witness the same servant moving from one side of the path to the other, his red attire encouraging us to follow his movements, a sense of the scene's tangible order and balance is visually communicated. By denying us access to dialogue as the scene unfolds, Kurosawa forces us to work at the visual representation of this on-screen challenge to Hidetora's power, his retinue and concubines being physically pushed to the castle walls to make way for Kaede's entourage. Kaede's power is asserted without recourse to dialogue, implying that she can use to her advantage not only the walls designed to confine her but also the silences expected of her gender. Moreover, it is a clear indication that the masculinity Hidetora has come to represent is now under threat, undermined as it is by Kaede's visual castration of Hidetora and with it the castration of the patriarchal systems he represents.

Kaede's command of the spatial relationships within the frame remains a constant throughout the film; though she is always seen within the confines of the castle walls, and from her first entrance onwards within the even more confined parameters of its internal rooms, she exercises control of matters beyond the scope of the world she inhabits. It is Kaede who commands Hidetora's presence in what she has defined as her territory, and the domestic space Kurosawa situates her in becomes her stage – a stage on which she performs the role of 'destructive and threatening male female' with chilling success. She serves as the antithesis to

Hidetora, constantly vying for the power vested in men within this feudal Japan, and contesting the spaces they have for so long seen as their own. In this owned stage space, Kaede continues to assert her power without recourse to extended dialogue, commandeering as she does the gaze of not only those who enter that space but also the gaze of the audience. She is shown to be at her most powerful when operating in an arena marked by its stillness and silences whereas our earlier visions of males, cast in a similarly still and silent mode, demonstrate their lack of ease. She continues to undermine patriarchal power whilst operating within the customary boundaries established by her gender.

Having further ensured the castration of Hidetora by summoning him into her arena and forcing him to affirm with his own blood his relinquishment of power, she continues to demonstrate her capacity to captivate and command the spectator's gaze as she outlines her reasons for seeking Hidetora's downfall. The sequence following Hidetora's departure is characterised by its stillness and its visual symmetry, the space between Taro and Kaede forming a significant part of the *mise en scène*, focusing as it does upon the empty space formerly occupied by Hidetora. And it is into this absence that Kaede delivers her initially monotonal revenge speech, eerily conjuring up the absent male power that has been the cause of her family's demise and challenging that power by the force of her performance. Throughout her performance she has faced forward, purposely denying Taro the eye contact he seeks; but as her pitch rises and she recounts her mother's act of *sepuko*, Kaede turns to the vacant space on which her mother's *sepuko* was performed, forcing Taro's gaze and the gaze of the camera to move with her. She is a skilled negotiator of cinematic space, unlike the males in the film; she is able to conjure up the invisible images of her mother and a power-

crazed Hidetora to dramatic effect whilst Hidetora can merely conjure up nightmare visions which remind him of his own isolation and vulnerability.

When she later aligns herself with Jiro she again uses her capacity to command the spatial elements yet remains within the boundaries dictated by her gender, servilely proffering tea as she quietly demands the execution of Hidetora as part of the realisation of her protracted revenge - a revenge she extracts in full upon the Ichimonji clan by the film's close. In the depiction of her relationship with Jiro, Kaede is again instrumental in resituating the camera's gaze, sexually objectifying him and thus placing him, along with Hidetora, before the lens in a way historically reserved for the female form. The icons of phallic power associated with the samurai warrior are reappropriated by Kaede, her prowess with the Jiro's knife suggesting that its use within the domesticated confines of her stage space, invests the object with greater power. It becomes emblematic of her capacity to usurp the domain of the samurai. As the males around her demonstrate their weaknesses and their inability to uphold the values of the samurai code they supposedly live by, Kaede strives to undermine the conventions that are pivotal to that code and to matters relating to family honour and loyalty. Her own loyalty to family is proven, the role of daughter being far more important to her than that of dutiful and submissive wife, whereas the sons of Hidetora, the next generation of the Ichimonji clan, have shown themselves to be either disloyal and dishonourable or ineffectual and unable to wield patriarchal control.

However, by challenging gender constructs, Kaede, like Goneril and Regan in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, ensures her own reconstruction as demon. Although her demonized persona is openly referred to throughout the film, numerous parallels being drawn between Kaede and both the fox and the serpent

of Japanese folklore,³¹ it is her actions which challenge the status quo and lead others to demonize her as a means of ensuring her elimination. According to Takakuwa, “the demonization of women who subvert the meaning of femininity contradictorily endows the women with (super)natural powers which patriarchy tries to repress or exorcize;”³² thus, Kurogane’s decapitation of Kaede serves as a re-assertion of patriarchal dominance, her figure finally framed and contained by the legs of the males who surround her. Inevitably, she is executed because she is a threat to samurai values and the samurai identity, linked as it is to the masculinity she has sought to undermine. Having emasculated their Lord and his offspring, she has metaphorically castrated all samurai; as Kurogane moves to the left of the frame he reclaims the power through a show of physical male strength, spraying her blood across the rear wall, representing symbolically the blood she has spilt across the kingdom. Yet since the spread of bloodshed and ‘chaos’, as part of the realisation of her revenge against the Ichimonji clan, was always Kaede’s ultimate goal, it is difficult to see her as being defeated by patriarchy, especially when her assassin has already proved himself dishonourable, having been responsible for the underhand elimination of Taro. Kurogane is unworthy of his samurai identity; his attempt to ‘exorcize’ what he sees as a threat to the patriarchal constructs which define him fails and the conventions of this masculine code remain irredeemably diluted.

Although Sué has posed no direct threat to the masculine values of the samurai code she suffers a similar end and serves as yet another reminder of the various ways in which women can be seen to undermine the validity of masculine behaviours. She is not demonised; nor does she transgress gender boundaries, and as such is not representative of the ‘male female’ construct that Howlett refers to.

However, her alignment with the pacifism of Buddhist theology places her in ideological opposition to the warring ways of the samurai and she becomes just another casualty of the violence inherent within its value system. Like Saburo, she is always placed within open, natural settings and her beheaded corpse is depicted surrounded by what should be the regenerative power of nature. She remains a Madonna-like figure – submissive, passive and reverent towards males – but there is a subversive edge to her construction, seated in her capacity to invalidate the actions of men like Kurogane who, ironically, set themselves up as protectors of women like Sué. Similarly, as chaos and flames engulf the Third Castle, Hidetora is unable to fulfil his role as protector of his concubines. The camera's focus shifts momentarily from Hidetora to his concubines as they, like Kaede's mother before them, commit the honourable act of seppuku, foregrounding for us a strong image of womanhood which offers a stark contrast to Hidetora's ineffectual attempts to do the same. Once more his masculinity is under threat as he sits passively, framed by a smoke-engulfed window, unable either to protect his concubines or to engineer his own honourable demise.



2.27 *Ran* (1987)

Rutter claims that , in tragedy, “Shakespeare habitually uses the woman’s body to proxy the crisis of masculine self-representation;”³³ in his construction of gender in *Ran*, the same can be said of Kurosawa.

Kurosawa’s depiction of patriarchy in crisis leads to an apocalyptic close in which all suffer and none are redeemed, and we are led to the conclusion that the very masculine codes and values at the core of patriarchy are destructive, inherently violent and unsustainable. *Ran* and *King Lear* proclaim their preoccupation with universal truths and a scepticism as to the validity of patriarchal institutions at both a familial and a political level; however, whilst Kurosawa’s depiction of the demise of patriarchy shares with its Shakespearean counterpart a concern with those who transgress gender boundaries, it is the dilution of the masculinity at the core of samurai values which sets *Ran* apart and ensures that it remains a work invested with its own ‘cultural capital’, existing within its own cultural reference points, Shakespeare’s decidedly Westernised version of the play operating here as intertext rather than source text. Although widely regarded as part of the ‘canon’ of Shakespeare on screen and appropriated by a Shakespearean heritage of global proportions, Kurosawa’s *Ran* refuses to be consumed by its Western affiliations and asserts instead its affiliations with the western genre in terms of its ideological premise and its iconic properties. If, as Howard suggests, the conventions of the western can be seen as a reinstatement of Renaissance codes of conduct revolving around *issues* of masculinity and “poetic justice,”³⁴ then the codes and conventions of the samurai may also be viewed as such. However, what Kurosawa proceeds to dramatise in *Ran* is the demise of the samurai, and by inference the demise of the western hero and Shakespeare’s tragic

hero, deconstructing the heroic myths of masculinity which surround these iconic figures in literature and film on a global scale.

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- ¹ Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa, Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (USA 2000), p.260.
² Yoshimoto, p.261.
³ James Goodwin, *Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema* (Baltimore, 1994), p.9.
⁴ Anne Billson, "The Emperor," *Time Out*, March, 14.
⁵ Ann Thompson, "Kurosawa's *Ran*: Reception and Interpretation," *East-West Film Journal*, Vol. 3, 1989, p.10.
⁶ Keiko McDonald, *Japanese Classical Theatre in Films* (London, 1994), p.142.
⁷ Ibid., p.125
⁸ John Collick, *Shakespeare, Cinema and Society: Cultural Politics* (Manchester, 1989), p.169.
⁹ Kenneth Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of TV on Screen* (Cambridge, 1999), p.197.
¹⁰ Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Olivier, Welles, Brook and Kurosawa* (Cambridge, 1990), p.23.
¹¹ Noel Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema* (London, 1979), pp.47-49.
¹² Peter Ackroyd, *The Spectator*, March 15th, 1986.
¹³ Yoshimoto, p. 259.
¹⁴ Burch, pp.47-49.
¹⁵ Collick, p.152.
¹⁶ Schatz, p.695.
¹⁷ Yoshiko Ueno, quoted in Ann Thompson, p.8.
¹⁸ Zvilca Serper, "Lady Kaede In Kurosawa's *Ran*: Verbal and Visual Characterisation Through Animal Traditions," *Japan Forum*, Vol. 13, Pt 2, 2001, p.148-149.
¹⁹ Darryl Jones, *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* (London, 2002), p.85-86.
²⁰ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, 1993), p.152.
²¹ Schatz, p.697.
²² Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford, 2004), p. 709.
²³ Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London: 1969), p.11.
²⁴ Kathy Howlett, *Framing Shakespeare on Film* (Ohio, 2000), p.121.
²⁵ Schatz, p.696.
²⁶ Carol Chillington Rutter, "Looking at Shakespeare's Women on Film", *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge 2000), p.242-243.
²⁷ McDonald, p.141.
²⁸ Ibid., p.42.
²⁹ Rutter, p.242.
³⁰ Howlett, p.121.
³¹ Serper, p.145-158.
³² Yoko Takakuwa, "(En)gendering Desire in Performance: *King Lear*, Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, Tadashi Suzuki's *The Tale of Lear*," *Shakespeare and his Contemporaries in Performance*, ed. Edward Escher (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 45-46.
³³ Rutter, p.252.
³⁴ Howard, p.299.

2.7 “Humanity must perforce prey upon itself like monsters of the deep”:

King Lear as Urban Gangster Movie

2.7 (i) The ‘Tragic’ Gangster

Although the gangster genre’s affiliations with Shakespeare may seem tenuous, there are undeniable parallels between this cinematic genre and both Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy. The narrative templates and the archetypes employed in the gangster movie mirror certain facets of the storytelling strategies adopted by Shakespeare and his theatrical contemporaries. Moreover, gangster movies revel in the kind of male-dominated violence and excessive body counts realised in Jacobean tragedy, and both genres overlap in terms of their ideological and thematic preoccupations, especially when coupled with notions of ‘revenge’.

When writing of the British gangster cycle prevalent from 1998 to 2001, Steve Chibnall notes that the narrative structure employed by the “heavy” gangster film of this era is usually “one of tragedy in the Shakespearean or Jacobean mode.”¹ Robert Murphy also highlights the connection between the Jacobean revenge tragedy and the British gangster genre, likening Jack Carter (*Get Carter*, 1970) to both John Webster’s Flamineo from *The White Devil* and Vindice in Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*; even if urban gangsters like Carter are “not so self-consciously evil” as their Jacobean counterparts, the protagonists in each genre are seen to share certain traits and characteristics.² Gangster versions of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* plot neatly the archetypal rise and fall of the ‘hero’ whose excesses preordain his demise: films like *Joe Macbeth* (1955), *Men of Respect* (1991), TV adaptation *Macbeth on the Estate* (1997), and Nick Paton’s *Macbeth* (2007) situate the narrative within an urban underworld and map the inevitable downfall of their over-reaching protagonists. Less obvious gangster

renditions of Shakespeare's plays also exist. Robert Warshow notes the narrative parallels between seminal gangster classics *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Little Caesar* (1931), Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy and Shakespeare's *Richard III*.³ Similarly, Richard Burt claims that, though Richard Loncraine doesn't create a gangster-fuelled underworld setting for his *Richard III* (1995), his screen version follows the classic gangster formula. He suggests that:

like the Elizabethan tragedies that focus on an overreaching Machiavellian anti-hero, the gangster film is built on a structure of identification and wish-fulfillment. Once the viewer's transgressive desire is vicariously satisfied - when the gangster reaches 'the top of the world' -he may be safely rejected, and his fall and destruction assuage the viewer's guilty conscience.⁴

Neil Sinyard argues that some gangster movies "consciously court" parallels with *Richard III*: he cites the 1958 *Al Capone* biopic as a film which integrates moments from Shakespeare's play text, whilst Richard's "behavioural strategies," characterised by what Sinyard terms "chilling hypocrisy yet dazzling chutzpah," are adopted wholesale by Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* as we cut from the baptism of his godchild to scenes of violent excess orchestrated at his command.⁵

However, whilst the 'formula' works successfully for the translation to screen of such Machiavellian Shakespearean over-reachers as Macbeth and Richard III, the cinematic transformation of a hero like King Lear is more problematic since his rise and fall cannot be mapped out as an exercise in ambitious excess, and his redemptive leanings do not fit neatly into the same 'rise and fall' narrative trajectory. A reoriented narrative placing the charismatic anti

hero Edmund at the centre of the story would provide the adapter with the rise and fall patterning expected of the early gangster movies of the 1930s, and his 'behavioural strategies,' like those of Richard III, lend themselves to a gangster-style rendition of his tale, yet there are no such screen versions to date. Lear's position is much more complex as is the audience's relationship with him, but interesting parallels can still be drawn between not only Shakespeare's Lear and the gangster patricians found in the *Godfather* trilogy (1972,1974,1990) and *My Kingdom* (2001), but between Lear and the overbearing patriarch of the noiresque *House of Strangers* (1949) which, though not ostensibly a gangster flick, pre-empt many of the narrative and thematic preoccupations at work in Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy.

The gangster genre can be read as an "allegory of both the allure and the potentially catastrophic consequences of untrammelled individualism,"⁶ and in this Lear, along with the likes of Macbeth and Marlowe's Tamburlaine, can be refigured as the archetypal gangster whose 'untrammelled individualism' takes him on a path to self-destruction. Whilst Lear's path is construed as a redemptive one in many staged versions of *King Lear*, in screen versions, with the exception of Kozintsev's *Korol Lir*, the redemptive elements are exorcised, or are at least rendered ineffectual, and we are presented with a patriarch whose wilfulness and innate belief in his own power position blinds him to the realities of his standing - a standing which is dependent upon his place within the hierarchy or the 'group'. Gangster Lears present us with what Langford terms a "performative contradiction of radical autonomy and dependency."⁷ Like the head of the 'mafia' family, Lear sees himself as being in thrall to no-one yet his "selfhood" is "constructed through the group"; the archetypal gangster's refusal to register the role of others as part of

the construct of selfhood may be seen as "regressive infantile fantasy," or confirmation of a psychotic personality disorder.⁸ Either diagnosis may be equally applicable to Shakespeare's *King Lear*: his desire to be safely placed within the confines of Cordelia's 'nursery' smacks of 'regressive infantile fantasy' and his violent excesses - demonstrated through exile of those who dare to question the wisdom of his actions and through his vitriolic verbal attacks upon his daughters - reveal his psychotic tendencies. His 'rise' to power is not part of the narrative trajectory but the mapping of his downfall can be successfully translated into the gangster genre template, the archetypal heroes of each genre sharing common ground in terms of their patriarchal positioning and their personality traits.

Historically, three seminal movies dating from the 1930s are regarded as the prototype of the gangster genre: *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Scarface, The Shame of the Nation* (1932) are synonymous with the gangster 'classic'. All three films, produced prior to the censorious interventions of the Hays Code, deal with the violence and criminality of the hoodlum underworld in a manner which was to disappear from movie screens by the mid 1930s as a consequence of the code. Despite disclaimers, placed in the opening and closing titles of these films, denouncing the gangster lifestyle they portray, *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* were withdrawn, re-release being denied until two decades later in 1953. The disclaimers served to cast the films in the mould of the morality tale; the opening of *Little Caesar* presents us with a biblical quotation – “..for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword” (Matthew: 26-52) - investing the film with a moral tone and foretelling the eventual demise of its protagonist, whilst the opening title card of *The Public Enemy* states the studio's intent to “honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of

American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal,” thus distancing the studio from any association with the glorification of the gangster lifestyle.

A similarly apologetic disclaimer was introduced to *Scarface*, *The Shame of the Nation*, at the insistence of the MPAA but due to the furore surrounding its portrayal of violence and its potential glorification of the gangster, the film was not a box office success and was withdrawn from circulation as a consequence. Despite the studios’ alleged attempts to present the genre as a means of educating the masses against the perils of a life of crime, the films themselves cannot escape the glamorisation of the gangster lifestyle; the attempts of Hollywood studios to appease critics of this emerging genre may be seen more as a smokescreen used to distance themselves from the controversy. Though dressed up as a morality tale in which the bad guy always loses, said bad guy’s charismatic appeal outweighs the consequences of his fall from grace, his ‘untrammelled individualism’ lending his persona a mythical quality which transcends his inevitable downfall and aligns him with the Machiavellian heroes of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre: Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* - and in some interpretations *Richard III* - are once more called to mind. In certain critical circles, *King Lear* has been deemed, similarly, a morality play showing us a redemptive path strewn with promises of regeneration,⁹ its message being much more positive than that of the early gangster films of the 1930s with their explicit disclaimers. However, cinematic offshoots of the play which adopt the gangster genre template tend to reflect its apocalyptic propensities and the darker messages expounded in the studio disclaimers rather than any kind of regenerative moral positioning. The ‘gangster’ Lears we are presented with do not follow the redemptive path with

any conviction; they remain flawed patricians, flawed father figures within the confines of both their 'mafia' family and their immediate family.

The gangster genre's hero, like his western counterpart, has an ambivalent relationship with the values of 'civilized' society, operating beyond the confines of the mainstream; we are dealing in the gangster movie with a criminal underworld which adheres to its own set of conflicting values, its own territorial hierarchies, creating a parallel 'country' that works outside the parameters of the 'civilized' and in which the mafia boss is king. In its preoccupation with the concept of family - both its inherent loyalties and its betrayals - the gangster genre offers a close resemblance to the Lear narrative. The so-called pursuit of family preservation invariably brings about not only the gangster's demise but that of the 'family' he seeks to protect, just as Lear's division of his lands, though it may be construed as an attempt to ensure a trouble-free devolution of power, precipitates his own destruction and that of his family and his kingdom. The 'kingdoms' within which the narratives unfold again conform to Schatz's genre of order, the "symbolic arena of action"¹⁰ becoming all-important as the backdrop to the ideological and territorial conflicts that ensue. The urban underworlds of the gangster movie inevitably stand in ideological opposition to the values of the 'legitimate' world and in this sense explore the same kind of juxtaposition of conflicting values realised in both the western and *King Lear*, the latter exploring the clash between an old feudal order epitomised by Lear, Kent and Gloucester and the emerging new order, characterised by self-interest and synonymous with Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund.

2.7 (ii) Displacing the Patriarchal Family: *House of Strangers* (1949)

Although, with hindsight, Joseph Mankiewicz's *House of Strangers* is classified as a *film noir* its affiliations with the genre tend to support the notion that *noir* is more an expression of style than a genre with a fixed narrative template and stock archetypes. James Naremore argues that *noir* is "one of the most amorphous categories in film history": it could "constitute a period, a genre, a cycle, a style, or simply a 'phenomenon' ." ¹¹ Its emergence marks the marrying of the stylistic techniques of German expressionism with the pulp fiction narratives of the hard-boiled detective story but *House of Strangers* is based on the family drama *I'll Never Go There Again* , a novel written by Jerome Weidman. Studio producer Sol Seigel wanted Max - grim lawyer on the Lower East Side - to become the focus of the narrative and commissioned studio writer Philip Yordan to work on the script. However, whilst Max Monetti emerges as the ambivalent protagonist of the film, displaying some of the characteristic traits of the noir hero, the storyline's continued preoccupation with notions of family, loyalty, honour and the clashes between an old world order and the values of a new world suggest its thematic associations lie more within the realms of the gangster genre than with film noir, despite the 'legitimate' nature of the business conducted by self-made immigrant Gino Monetti who heads the Monetti Bank and the Monetti household.

Foster Hirsh claims that whilst the mood of the film is *noir* it cannot be regarded as a traditional *noir*; it employs the conventions of *film noir* "style-wise more than story-wise," making it more "generic hybrid" ¹² than pure *film noir*, though the existence of any film which is 'pure *noir*' remains dubious. *House of Strangers* takes us into a world of dimly lit urban backstreets and seedy nightclubs, Max's shabby office, housed within the halls of the Monetti bank,

offering a stark contrast to the bank's opulence, especially when his criminal clients hang around its perimeters waiting for an audience with him. The costuming and iconography is redolent with *noir* imagery and Max is attracted to Irene, a 'dangerous' beauty of *noir*-like edginess. However, though Irene is positioned as the 'other' woman who lures Max away from his family commitment to marry the good Italian girl chosen for him by his father, she does not meet our expectations of the *femme fatale*. Instead, as in *The Godfather*, she represents a world outside the confines of 'family'; just as Michael Corleone initially chooses Kay and eventually marries her, Max chooses to leave with Irene, rejecting the patriarchal control of the immigrant father figure and the traditions of the old world. *Noir* narratives do, on occasion, involve the "displacement of the patriarchal family"¹³ and the tensions within this dysfunctional family become the main narrative thrust of *House of Strangers*, but the film does not fit with the conventions of the Hollywood thriller noir of the forties which tend to focus on morally flawed or psychologically damaged individuals.¹⁴ Despite some of the ambiguities in his character, Max remains the Cordelia-like 'good son' who stands in opposition to his materialistic brothers. Hersch notes that the film has two antecedents - biblical references to Joseph and his brothers and *King Lear* -¹⁵ but it has also generated subsequent film narratives in the form of the western *Broken Lance* and *The Godfather* gangster trilogy, creating intriguing intertextual connections between Shakespeare's play, the novels of Weidman and Mario Puzo and a range of genres across an extended period of cinematic history.

Although Max is constructed as the hero of the film we are drawn to the overbearing yet charismatic father figure, Gino Monetti, throughout the narrative. He is the working class immigrant who has realised the American Dream - the

figure-head of the Monetti Bank - and he becomes the “psychologically static” embodiment of a fixed “world view,” his immigrant mindset harbouring his “unchanging cultural position.”¹⁶ His is a story of “wild self assertion” and “radical self-fashioning”¹⁷ on a par with that of the seminal gangsters of the 1930s. The opening moments of the film, photographed on location, present a series of exterior shots of the Lower East Side from which Gino has ‘risen’. Urban hustle and bustle dominate the frame and the sense of place is firmly established. Shot on location rather than within the usual perimeters of a studio set, the urban location is established as central to this narrative.



2.28 *House of Strangers* (1949)

From the landscape of the immigrant East Side we move to the ‘civilized’ seat of finance, visually highlighting Gino’s rise from the Lower East Side to the architecture of the corporate world he comes to inhabit. But whilst we hear of Gino’s rise to power through his egotistical recollections, the narrative focuses on his deconstruction and his ultimate downfall in much the same way as both the

narrative structure of the gangster genre and Shakespeare's *King Lear* map the inevitable demise of the father figure.

The film's trailer foregrounds Gino Monetti, the voiceover telling us that "he built his empire from the gutter up" and that "those who live under his roof are all strangers in the house of their mother, for the sins of their father have torn them apart," turning Marina's "house of love" into a "house of strangers." The moralistic tone of the trailer is similar to that of the disclaimers employed in the opening moments of the early 1930s gangster films, its message in *House of Strangers* being that money and power can lead to emotional bankruptcy of the kind realised by Gino Monetti and, by inference, King Lear. However, the redemptive strands of the *Lear* narrative are sacrificed to the moral of this film's tale, and Gino remains a man isolated by his own wrong-doing. Langford argues that a Marxist reading of the gangster genre stresses "the notion of self alienation as an irradicable function of capitalism," resulting in the inevitable "corruption of the family";¹⁸ given the film trailer's condemnation of Gino, his 'self alienation' and his 'corruption of the family', similar claims can be made for *House of Strangers*. When Gino faces a prison sentence due to his illegal banking practices, his sons, with the exception of Max, refuse to stand by him since he has treated them so harshly during their lifetime; Gino proclaims "For a few dollars a week I coulda had a good son," thus reducing the sum of their emotional commitment to a monetary level and demonstrating how the capitalistic advancement he has pursued in the name of the family has inevitably corrupted it.

Gino plays the domineering patriarch within the confines of his own home. Its palatial grandeur is overly opulent and claustrophobic, the operatic strains of *The Barber of Seville* (another tale of a self-made man who, like Monetti, built up

an empire against the odds) blasting out discomfotingly from the gramophone at Gino's command and demonstrating the way in which he pervades every aspect of the family's existence. The parallels between the overbearing Gino and the petulant King Lear are clearly drawn as are their demands for acquiescence from their offspring. And, like Lear, Gino's 'psychologically static' persona leads to a self-willed denial of the changes taking place around him. When Gino first enters the frame in his chauffeur-driven car his regal presence is acknowledged by the crowd that surrounds his bank. His name is engraved into the stonework of the building and his portrait dominates the banking hall where petitioners cue up for a personal audience with him. He doles out monetary favours in an arbitrary fashion, making much of his own benevolence as he gives money to a woman who needs cash to pay for her son's medical care, yet proceeds to charge exorbitant interest rates to a struggling immigrant worker. Although his dealings are conducted within a legitimised system, his *modus operandi* has much in common with those of the mafia bosses found in gangster movies who grant or deny 'favours' to their clientele; indeed, the opening moments of both *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* echo these scenes from *House of Strangers* as the Dons gift favours to waiting petitioners.

In stark contrast to the grandeur of his initial arrival at the bank, Gino is later swamped by rioting investors who are protesting against the government closure of the bank due to its improper trading practices. His emotional investment in the ways of the old world and the old ways of conducting business brings the family empire crashing down. Failure to comply with the rules and regulations being introduced within this emerging capitalistic world - a world he is unable and unwilling to engage with due to his 'unchanging cultural position' - sets him apart

and the film continues to map the deconstruction of his empire as we witness the dramatic removal of his name from the architecture of the bank, the old order visibly being replaced by the new with a sign noting the names of his sons now dominating the frame. Gino, like Lear, is cast out into a parallel ‘wilderness’, a castrated patrician for whom death is the only natural progression.



2.29 *House of Strangers* (1949)



2.30 *House of Strangers* (1949)

The final drama in which Max confronts his brothers on his release from jail gives the film a potentially Jacobean twist in the closing moments as Joe tries to kill Max and Pietro kills Joe, but the body count and the violence are minimal and

in line with the forties Hollywood studio system, closure is neat and 'happy' as we return to the romantic story line, Max and Irene driving off into the sunset.

2.7 (iii) Mafia Father Figures: *The Godfather Trilogy*

However, despite the hero status of Max and the fact that much of the film's screen time is devoted to his love interest with Irene, this remains Gino's story. The significance of the Gino Monetti character is underlined by the casting of studio star Edward G Robinson who, by the late 1940s, is associated with the archetypal gangster. Robinson's lead role in the seminal gangster film, *Little Caesar*, was followed by similar performances in six gangster movies prior to the release of *House of Strangers*, establishing his persona with that of the gangster hero in the mind of his audience. Studio bosses – many of immigrant origins – gave the film only a limited release due to the negative implications of the immigrant experience being linked intrinsically to that of the gangster.¹⁹ What is also apparent to the modern cinema-going audience are the parallels between this film and the narrative strands which run through *The Godfather* trilogy: the theme of the immigrant's rise to a position of authority, the harking back to the traditions of the old country, the significance of family, its honour, its loyalties and its inherent betrayals are sewn into the fabric of the narrative of *House of Strangers* and all three *Godfather* films. Much has been made of the connections between *King Lear* and *The Godfather Part III*; by the time Coppola is coerced into making a third *Godfather* film he is seen to co-opt *King Lear* as a means of investing the tired story line with the required "grandeur,"²⁰ but the narrative patterning in *House of Strangers* and each of the *Godfather* films suggests that connections with Mankiewicz's film and *King Lear* are more closely drawn across

the trilogy as a whole. What ties together the films and their particular take on Shakespeare's play are their shared thematic and ideological preoccupations: we have a performance space and a film world of 'contested spaces' in which society's values are in flux, violent social disintegration being a direct consequence; we have 'families' led by domineering patriarchs who, in pursuit of family preservation, engender its downfall from within; and notions of 'family' honour and loyalty tested against a backdrop of deception and betrayal of decidedly tragic 'Jacobean' proportions.

Just as Weidman viewed his novel as a 'family' drama, *The Godfather* is, according to its author, Mario Puzo, "a family novel rather than a crime novel," his don more of an "old patriarch who makes the world safe for his beloved family" than the "foul-mouthed, bloodthirsty thug of previous gangster books and movies."²¹ By the seventies, the makers of gangster movies were no longer forced into taking a moral stand in opposition to the mobster lifestyle, leaving Puzo and Coppola free to invest their archetypal gangster hero with a sense of 'old world' honour: he is the immigrant who has 'made good' via the only means open to him in this new world and he remains a "benefactor of the powerless"²² within his neighbourhood through a route less legal yet not dissimilar to that taken by Gino Monetti. Marlon Brando saw Don Corleone as "a kind of hero, a man to be respected... a man of substance, tradition, dignity, refinement, a man of unerring instinct who just happened to live in a violent world,"²³ and his performance reflects his more complex and humane reading of this mafia father figure. Nevertheless Don Corleone does inhabit an underworld of crime and, in keeping with the conventions of the genre of order, the mafia setting remains all-important. Paramount Studios at first wanted to change the setting from New York to St

Louis or Kansas City, moving the story from the forties into a more contemporary time frame but Coppola maintained that its existing time and place were essential components of the narrative, arguing that the crime boss and his family are symbolic of the strengths and weaknesses of an emerging corporate America of the 1940s.²⁴

As with *King Lear*, we first enter Don Corleone's world at a point when he is feeling the weight of leadership rather than with the tracking of his rise to glory as is the conventional narrative trajectory of the thirties gangster movie. The opening moments of play text and film text also present us with a parallel situation: Don Corleone holds 'court' as petitioners line up to request favours from him on the day of his daughter's wedding; Lear holds court ostensibly to arrange the marriage of Cordelia to suitors France or Burgundy, but has the covert agenda of granting favours through the division of his territories. In both situations, they emerge as powerful, patriarchal figures of seemingly benevolent intent, presiding over portentous 'celebratory' moments. Such intertextual allusions to *King Lear* are threaded into the fabric of the trilogy as a whole as are references to other Shakespearean tragedies and histories.²⁵ The narrative patterning established at the start of *The Godfather* is revisited in both *Godfather* sequels, Don Corleone's role being taken up by his successor, Michael, who seems to morph from wilful favoured child of Cordelia-like proportions in *The Godfather* to the new pseudo Lear figure in *The Godfather: Part II*. Just as Don Corleone presides over the granting of favours in the first film's opening frames, Michael is petitioned for assistance by Rocco Lampone who "kisses" the hand of this "young prince, recently crowned king,"²⁶ whilst beyond the confines of his office the Corleone family are again seen engaging in a family oriented celebration, this time in

attendance at Michael's son's communion and post communion party. Similarly, we open with a ceremony and celebratory party in *The Godfather: Part III* as Michael Corleone is granted The Order of St Sylvester, degree of Knight Commander for outstanding service to the Catholic church, one such 'service' echoing Lear's gifting of lands.

The trilogy's performance parallels with *King Lear* are undeniable, investing each film by association with some of the mythical grandeur of Shakespeare's play. However, what is most striking is the way in which Coppola underlines the mythical proportions of the father figure within the Corleone dynasty by cutting from the family business and celebrations in the opening moments of *The Godfather: Part II* to a flashback narrative detailing the miraculous escape of Vito Corleone from his native Sicily; the Sicilian landscape opens on a very different kind of ceremony, this time a funeral procession in which "the figures move slowly, seemingly from out of hundreds of years of the past."²⁷ The language of the screenplay is redolent with mythical weight, lending the moment a fable-like quality, and setting up Vito Corleone as a child with a 'charmed' life. He becomes synonymous with the immigrant's 'rise against all odds' scenario as images of immigrant families "huddled together with all their earthly possessions on their way to America" are juxtaposed with that of New York harbour as "we glide past the Statue of Liberty,"²⁸ icon of hope and future prosperity.

The Godfather trilogy also shares with *King Lear* a preoccupation with redemption - a characteristic far from the conventional realms of the classic gangster movie in which the rise and the inevitable fall of the archetypal hero is a given. Don Vito Corleone is resistant to the 'family's' association with money

procured through drugs and prostitution, and he retains the old world values of his Sicilian upbringing within the Catholic church, despite the more violent actions he must perform in order to retain control of his mafia 'family'. He is out of sync with the new families who wish to enter into the aforementioned branches of underworld crime and - as with Lear - it is, in part, his resistance to the new order that ensures his demise. Despite his earlier Machiavellian rise to power, Michael's redemptive desires are foregrounded prominently at the close of *The Godfather: Part II* when he states "All my life I wanted out," echoing Lear's desire to relinquish control of his kingdom. Unlike the stock archetype of the gangster genre, whose world view according to Schatz is "static" and unchanging,²⁹ Michael actively seeks to change his view and his position within the world. His redemptive attempts to legitimise the family business are set in motion in *Part II* but are realised in *Part III* when he sells off the family's casinos and buys into the seemingly legitimate Immobilair, an old, respected European company in which the Vatican has a considerable financial stake and that is, ironically, eventually exposed as a corrupt institution.

Michael's redemptive path is, however, blocked at every turn not only in this respect but also in terms of his capacity to protect his immediate family who, like Lear's daughters, conspire against him at various times. His opening voiceover in *The Godfather Part III* states "I would burn in hell to keep you safe," but it is his dissolution of his mafia 'family' that brings about the death of his daughter, Mary, and the eventual demise of the Corleone empire. By trying to extricate himself from his gangster persona - just as Lear attempts to extricate himself from the burdens of state - Michael precipitates his own downfall, denying his dependency upon the 'family' to which his identity is intrinsically linked. The

closing image of the Don shows him a lonely, isolated old man who keels over unceremoniously, his death echoing that of his father. There have been many deaths en route during the course of the trilogies' narrative but, in the moments prior to the Don's uneventful death scene, the film plays to its Jacobean strengths in a frenzy of revenge attacks.

The family's attendance at the opera house is intercut with scenes of Vincent Corleone – son of Sonny and rising star of the Corleone 'family' – wreaking revenge on conspirators of the Immobiliare scam: the corrupt archbishop and the traitor Don Lucrezzi meet a bloody end and Don Atobello suffers the ultimate Jacobean fate of death by poisoning as he eats the cakes Michael's sister has prepared for him in a macabre act of family revenge.



2.31 *The Godfather III* (1990)

The final showdown on the steps of the opera house presents us with a highly emotive, theatrical moment – borrowing heavily from the *Lear* text; the grieving king's "Howl! Howl! Howl!" (5.3:255) permeates the frame as Mary dies in the arms of her howling, grief-stricken father, freighted with the dramatic weight of prior stage and screen performances of *King Lear*. This last film in the trilogy may lack the critical acclaim garnered by its predecessors but, in its ambitious

attempts to place the Corleone family saga firmly within the realms of tragedy, it achieves considerable success.



2.32 *The Godfather III* (1990)

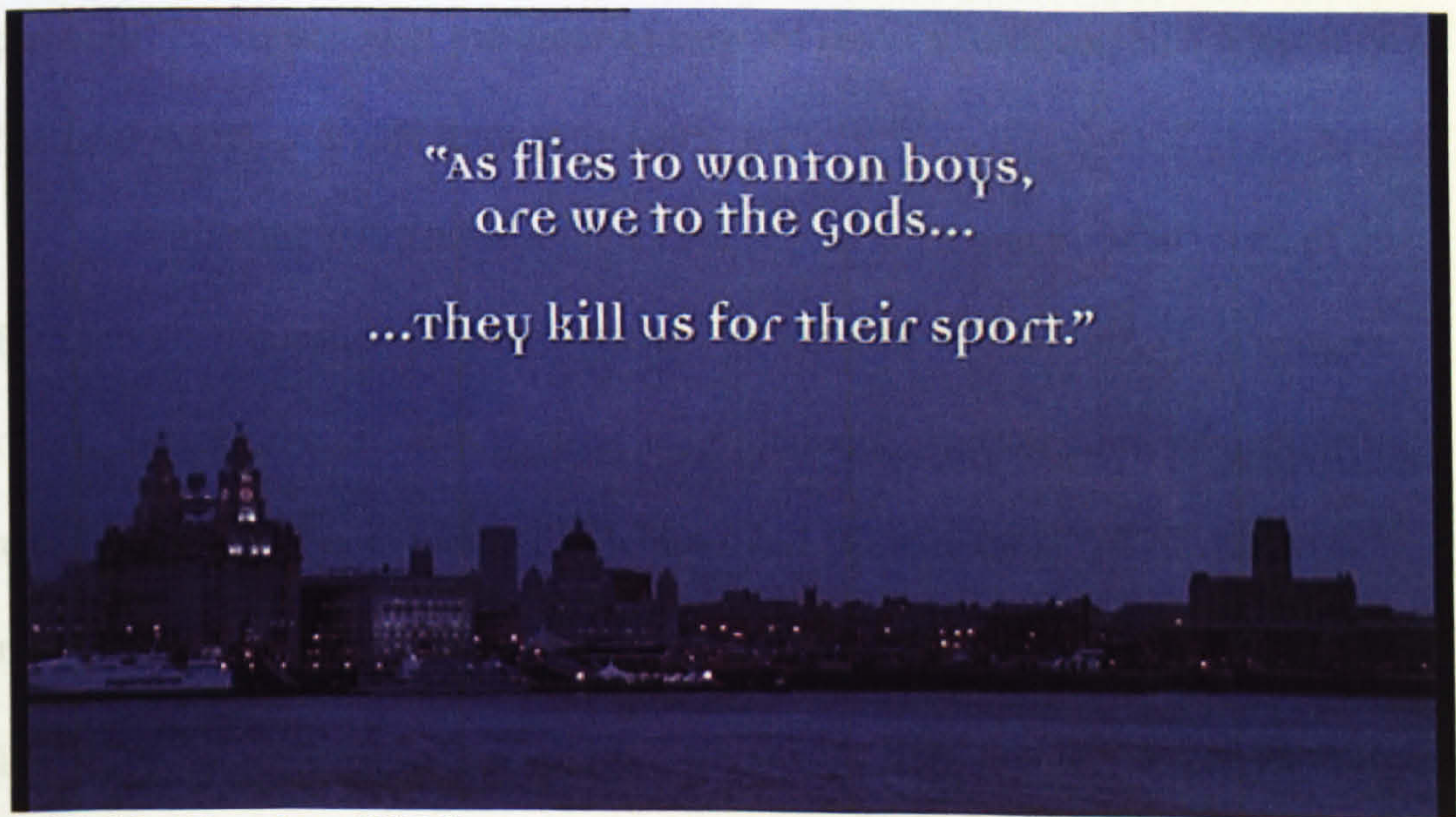
Michael Corleone's narrative trajectory is finally realised: whilst his initial 'gangster' fate has more in common with Shakespearean protagonists like the ambitious over-reacher, Macbeth, he emerges during the course of *The Godfather III* as a man who, like Lear, seeks redemption and forgiveness.

2.33 *My Kingdom* (2001)

For director Don Boyd, Liverpool functions "not just as a background"; here, place is "integral to the story,"³⁰ its "profile in history"³¹ adding extra layers to the film's subtext. Courtney Lehmann argues that Boyd "privileges place as a means of direct engagement with a present whose identity has been eroded by the

2.7 (iv) Gangster *Lear* as Morality Tale: *My Kingdom* (2001)

The immigrant experience explored in both *House of Strangers* and *The Godfather* trilogy is once more central to the characterisation of the protagonist found in Don Boyd's *My Kingdom*; the founding fathers of each of these dynasties come from an underclass who have succeeded against the odds in a land of 'greater opportunity'. In *My Kingdom*, the Sicilian born New Yorker is superseded by the Irish interloper whose land of opportunity becomes the supposedly wealthier docklands of a contemporary Liverpool, basking in its former colonial glory - a "great city" of "steam ships" and "iron shavings" according to protagonist Sandeman in a rare moment of nostalgic reflection before his world is plunged into chaos. The significance of place is again made abundantly clear as the opening shots privilege the cityscape and docklands of a contemporary Liverpool.



2.33 *My Kingdom* (2001)

For director Don Boyd, Liverpool functions "not just as a background"; here, place is "integral to the story,"³⁰ its "profile in history"³¹ adding extra layers to the film's subtext. Courtney Lehmann argues that Boyd "privileges place as a means of direct engagement with a present whose identity has been eroded by the

centrifugal energies of globalisation, the paranoia of a post 9/11 culture, an imploding neglect and, above all, the fear that the apocalypse has already arrived.”³² Her critique invests the film with a political agenda, its setting becoming synonymous with “the spectre of long-term cataclysmic decline”³³ and the kind of inevitable nihilism with which many stage productions and screen versions of *King Lear* have become associated from the late twentieth century onwards. Lehmann claims that Boyd’s depiction of Liverpool as a site of “broken promises of urban renovation” functions as an exposé of the ways in which global capitalism preys upon humanity and thus connects the predatory nature of twenty-first century capitalism with Lear’s world in which “humanity must perforce prey upon itself.”³⁴ However, Lehmann also highlights the regenerative propensities embedded in the film, its “almost total nihilism” performing “its own kind of urban ‘renovation’,”³⁵ and offering it would seem the kind of regenerative possibilities envisaged at the close of Edward Bond’s stark socialist adaptation of the *Lear* narrative in his stage play *Lear*.

Whilst the political ideologies seen by Lehmann to be at the core of the film remain a question of interpretation, its function as a morality tale is more overt. Despite the moralising attached to seminal gangster films of the thirties, via clumsy and unconvincing disclaimers and the inevitable fall of the over-reaching gangster hero, the glamorisation of the gangster lifestyle and the protagonist’s charismatic appeal prevails. In *My Kingdom* Boyd is at pains to distance himself from any kind of romanticising of the gangster image and seeks instead, against genre convention, to explore the “moral complexities” of a gangster patriarch such as Sandeman.³⁶ As with the Sicilian ‘godfathers’, Irish immigrant Sandeman is seen to retain his connections to the church, Liverpool’s

cathedral becoming a symbol for the morality at the core of the narrative as it takes on an iconic architectural significance within the film. The opening images of Liverpool's dockside are juxtaposed alongside panning shots of the cathedral, the streets below the shadows of this grand structure harbouring prostitutes and drug addicts.



2.34 *My Kingdom* (2001)

Despite the excessive violence of the script - in which the psychotic Jug's sadistic acts are frequently given screen prominence - and its inclusion of a key scene in which Sandeman disrespectfully brokers a drugs deal via mobile phone during a church service, the custodians of the cathedral agreed to filming inside its interior, maintaining that Boyd is taking a very "moral position" about the people involved.³⁷ Sandeman's journey towards some kind of Lear-like redemption provides the film's narrative momentum and the closing moments of the film witness the demise of his adversaries, leaving the villains either dead or arrested.

He becomes the British gangster film's "wronged man pursuing justice,"³⁸ avenging his own betrayal. The values of 'civilized society' appear to be upheld,

order is restored and Jo - unlike Cordelia - lives on, maintaining the film's moral centre.

However, Boyd infuses his film with moral ambiguities, building on those found in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Sandeman's grandson, constructed as pseudo Fool, becomes synonymous with 'innocence' which, by the close of the film, is sacrificed unceremoniously, his callous murder mirroring that of the play's hanged Cordelia. The boy also becomes a pseudo Cordelia, affecting her *moral* presence in her *material* absence in much the same way as the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is often played as a manifestation of Lear's estranged daughter. Sandeman's relationship with this child provides his pathway to redemption; homeless, cast out on the docklands with only his grandson, Sandeman comes to the realisation that it is more important to be seen as "the man" by this boy than by the 'mafia' family which has ultimately ejected him.



2.35 My Kingdom (2001)

Echoes of the reconciliation scene between Lear and Cordelia saturate the film text and when Sandeman finds the body of the murdered child, his howls resonate

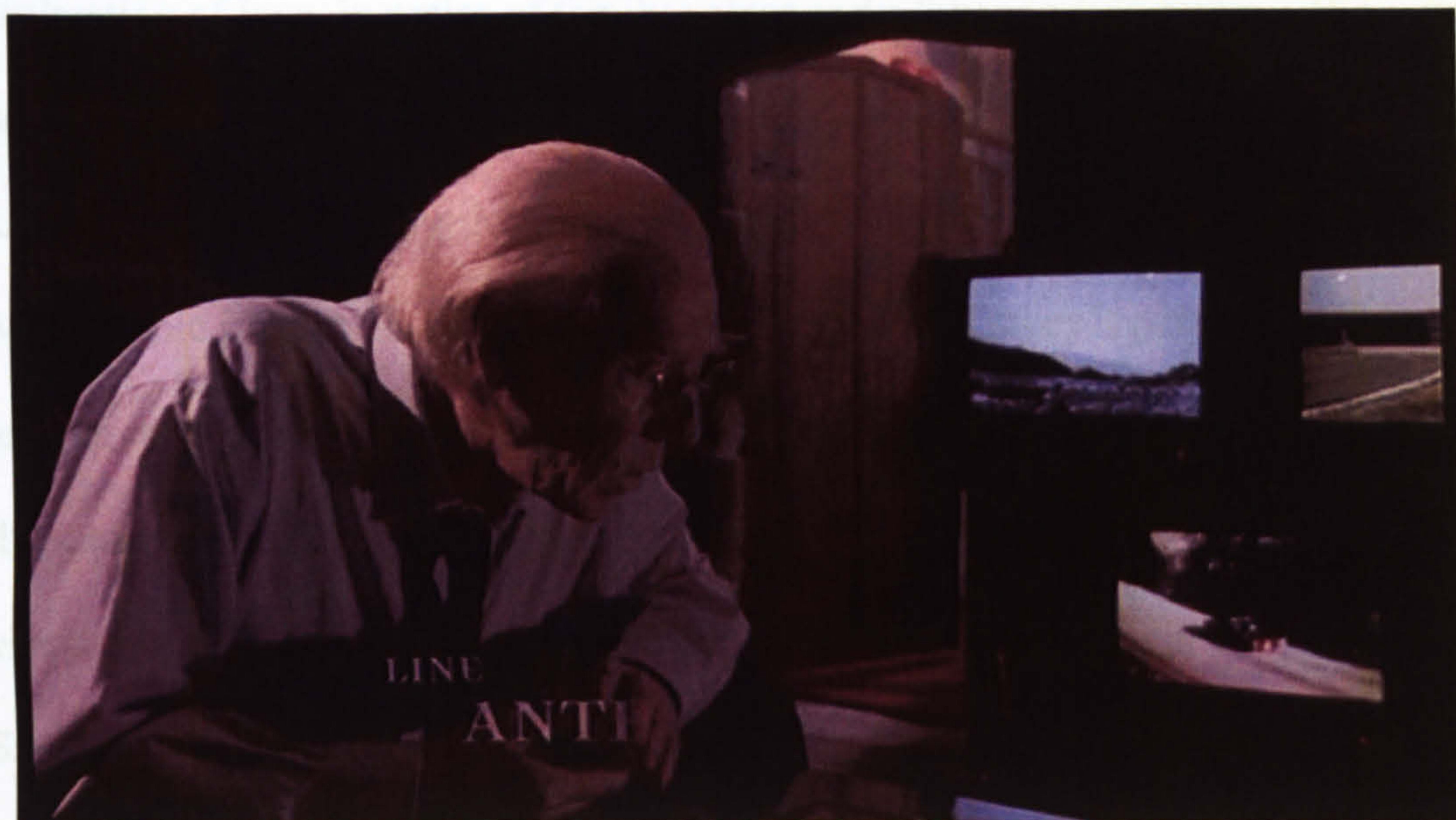
with the tragedies of former stage and screen moments from both *King Lear* and the closing moments of *The Godfather Part III*. Vindicated in part by his involvement in the capture of the gangster 'family members' he once protected, and reconciled with his 'good' daughter, Jo, Sandeman remains the isolated hero of the genre of order, unable to re-assimilate or to accept the values of either the 'civilised' world or those of an underworld in flux. He is 'dead' in all but a physical sense: his identity, so closely linked to that of his 'gangster family' is shattered and his place within the traditional family is untenable. He is a cipher, a 'nothing', the moral of the tale being realised as he is seen drifting off into the dockland landscape in the film's final frames.

Boyd states categorically that his film is not an adaptation of *King Lear*, his story's links to the *Lear* narrative being secondary to its setting: it is "idiosyncratic" Liverpool which provided his inspiration for the making of a film "about a society in moral decline."³⁹ And yet, of all cinematic off-shoots of *King Lear*, whether rooted in the gangster genre, the western, the jidai-geki genre, road movie or melodrama, Boyd's *My Kingdom* bears closest resemblance to Shakespeare's play in terms of its thematic and ideological preoccupations, its structural parallels, its character constructs *and* its theatricality. It is by far the most self-consciously Shakespearean of *all* genre-based readings of the Lear myth. Boyd takes his title from Shakespeare's *Richard III*, a play which already shares certain affiliations with the gangster genre and his script incorporates many lines from Shakespeare's plays: Jug and Desmond engage in a tedious Shakespearean quoting 'joust' as a prelude to their 'duel'; Detective Quick and Sandeman have a 'wilderness' moment in which Quick reappropriates Albany's line, reminding Sandeman that "Humanity must perforce prey upon itself like monsters of the

deep”(4.2:50-51); and Richard Harris, cast as Sandeman, avails himself of every ‘performance’ opportunity, reshaping Shakespeare’s lines into the vernacular as he ‘exiles’ his youngest daughter - “From this moment on you are not my daughter. They can pluck my eyes out before I ever lay sight on you again” - and bemoans his cruel treatment at the hands of his other daughters, stating “I’ve got to gather my wits about me. Fed ‘em, I did. Housed ‘em, I did... well, if you have a tear you can shed it now.” Yet directorial reference to *King Lear* only comes in the final frame, its typeface stating : “From a story by Don Boyd, inspired by William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.”

Boyd follows the narrative structure of *King Lear* closely and it is one of few screen ‘adaptations’ of the play which realise on screen its inherent violence: initial scenes of sadistic torture are compounded throughout, culminating in the putting out of Quick’s eyes, and a final body count of suitably Jacobean tragic proportions. Boyd’s archetypal heroes and villains are also carbon copies of those found in *King Lear* and unlike writer-directors of other gangster renditions of the narrative, he feels no compulsion to change the gender of his adversaries nor to exorcise the more overtly redemptive elements of Lear’s psychological journeying. The role of women in this gangster film - dominant, in control, independent - plays against generic convention and the on-screen realisation of Mandy Sandeman fleshes out the missing component of the Shakespearean source text, reconfiguring the power-base as Lynn Redgrave infuses the role with a matriarchal might that resonates throughout the film, despite her early demise. It is Mandy who dominates the opening scenes, who provides family unity: when family members are first introduced she is at the centre of all activity, orchestrating events and sharing moments of intimacy with her daughters and her

grandson whilst Sandeman sits alone playing *Patience*, action scenes from three tv screens flickering constantly behind his prophetically inert frame.



2.36 *My Kingdom* (2001)

Her absence as the narrative unfolds reverberates throughout. Yet the egotistical Sandeman is unable to accept that her death is the result of a random act of violence: he concocts conspiracy theories, asking “Who in God’s name would mug me?” rather than accepting that the world he has helped to shape has also generated desperate drug addicted boys like Mandy’s murderer, Delroy.

Sandeman is introduced as a man whose place at the head of the gangster hierarchy is uncontested yet he, like Lear, is already contemplating his own withdrawal having decided to appoint his youngest daughter as custodian of the family business a year prior to the film’s narrative turning point - a point precipitated by the murder of his wife. There are numerous striking similarities between film text and play text at a structural level. The reading of the will works as a parallel moment to the division of the land in *King Lear*, both scenes encapsulating the political dynamics of the narrative. Boyd separates the ‘love

test' from the division, turning Mandy's wake into a macabre display of 'show and tell' grief with Sandeman's eldest daughter, Kath, indulging in an insincere public declaration of love, in praise of family values and a "wonderful" father - "You we honour, you we obey, you we love" - whilst Tracey steals her glory with a tortuous karaoke rendition of Barry Manilow's 'Mandy'. However, the scene is intercut with graphic images of sadistic torture perpetrated by Tracey's partner, Jug, leading us to question the sincerity of these public displays of affection in much the same way as Cordelia's opening asides invite our scepticism. Through such visual means Boyd also demonstrates the impending decline of the patriarchal Sandeman: we cut from Sandeman and Desmond, father of Mandy's murderer, to scenes of said murderer's explicit torture - despite Sandeman's orders not to harm him, despite his reassurances to Desmond that the boy is safe. Once again, the values of the old criminal order, synonymous with Sandeman and Desmond, are superseded by a new order, devoid of the veneer of honour and integrity a church-going father-figure like Sandeman has lent to the criminal underworld.

The film's preoccupation with 'family', with matters of love, honour, deception and betrayal draws obvious parallels with the *Lear* narrative in much the same way as its gangster predecessors. However, Boyd's film offers a much closer exploration of the play's interrogation of the theme of justice. Detective Quick points out to Sandeman that the working class Delroys of this world are "tragic" since the only way they can "make it off the streets in Liverpool is through the entertainment industry, sport or crime"; but he also argues that Sandeman (and by associative inference King Lear) and "[his] kind" rob them of "hope," leading this gangster patrician to question his position. Moreover, it forces him to accept the earlier claims of his underworld rival, The Chair, who

argues that Sandeman, as the drug provider who breeds boys like Delroy, is responsible for the death of his own wife. A Marxist reading of the film flags up the “corruption of family” as a repeated motif of the gangster genre.⁴⁰ As with *House of Strangers*, this film’s trailer highlights issues of power and money: it is set up as “a conflict over a mother’s legacy,” in which “a family battles for control of a kingdom,” Jo stating that it is “*always* about money.” And it is in pursuit of money and power, ostensibly for the good of the ‘family’ that gangster father figures like Sandeman ultimately destroy it, “encapsulating the Marxist insight that the protected ‘familial’ realm cannot finally be protected from the atomising forces of the very capitalism that claims to preserve it.”⁴¹ Sandeman’s pursuit of power and wealth culminates in the death of his wife, the destruction of his family and his ultimate self-alienation. The closing shot of a solitary, powerless Sandeman, wandering aimlessly in the docklands locale he once ruled, offers a stark visual contrast to the opening frames of the Liverpool landscape he dominated at the narrative’s outset.



2.37 *My Kingdom* (2001)

Lehmann credits the film with the capacity to highlight the “predatorial instincts of global capitalism;”⁴² it dramatises humanity’s need to “consume or be consumed”⁴³ in a fashion which owes a great debt to Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and seemingly to its gangster predecessors. However, *My Kingdom*, unlike seminal American gangster movies past and present, or British gangster films of either “heavy” tragic leanings or the “gangster-light” versions of the recent British gangster cycle,⁴⁴ is difficult to ‘place’ within the film market. Lehmann sees it as a “postnostalgia film” which, through its privileging of place offers a “direct engagement with” the present, avoiding a “sense of period” and the kind of nostalgic “retreat into the past” offered by so many heritage screen versions of Shakespeare’s plays.⁴⁵ Yet its reliance upon the theatricality of *King Lear* means that it sits uneasily alongside contemporary British gangster films, even though some share similar Jacobean or Shakespearean tragic elements. Chibnall cites Paul McGuigan’s *Gangster No. 1* (2000) as a classic British gangster film which addresses the “weighty themes of classical drama: obsession, ruthless ambition, treachery, deception, moral decay and the possibility of redemption,” the director comparing its script to Greek tragedy and Richard Bridgland, production designer, likening it to “*The Duchess of Malfi* with guns.”⁴⁶ But whilst *Gangster No. 1* plays with its Jacobean connections - concerning itself with notions of ‘evil’ as a by-product of “individual pathology” as opposed to “social condition”⁴⁷ - *My Kingdom* seems to be consumed by them. Guardian critic Peter Bradshaw labels it a “ponderous, heavy-handed version of *King Lear*” in which Boyd’s “sentimentalised ending bowdlerises the original like a modern-day Nahum Tate.”⁴⁸ Mike Clark, writing for *USA Today*, is similarly scathing, arguing that, “whereas *Sexy Beast* seemed to revitalize the British gangster movie,” *My*

Kingdom “merely sustains it.”⁴⁹ Indeed, rather than ‘merely sustain[ing]’ the status quo, it could be argued that *My Kingdom* serves to *regress* the genre: its political dimensions and its critique of capitalism seem more in line with the Thatcherite critiques embedded in the British gangster films of the eighties as opposed to those of the new millennium.

John Hill argues that British eighties gangster films embody a “self-conscious” commentary on the social and economic state of the nation during the Thatcher era with films like *The Long Good Friday* (1980) exploring “the emergent enterprise culture of the 1980s,”⁵⁰ and in this respect, *My Kingdom*, seems to hark back to bygone times rather than engaging in any kind of ‘postnostalgic’ rendition of the universal messages at the heart of *King Lear*. Furthermore, unlike the American gangster mythologised on screen from the thirties onwards as an over-reaching Machiavellian figure of undeniable charismatic appeal, the British gangster’s mythical status remains more tenuous.⁵¹ By co-opting instead the mythological grandeur of *King Lear*, Boyd compensates for this missing dimension but in so doing he compromises his protagonist’s gangster persona: the opening image of the solitary, ineffectual Sandeman playing *Patience* stays with us and the sense of him being a man “more sinned against than sinning”(3.2:59-60) is foregrounded at the expense of the credibility of his position as ruthless gangster patrician. What is achieved through the *subtleties* of theme, ideology and inferred similarity between Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and the gangster archetypes of the *Godfather* trilogy or *House of Strangers* is heavily-handedly incorporated into all aspects of *My Kingdom*.

Tony Howard’s contention that the western “reinstates Renaissance codes of masculinity and poetic justice”⁵² is equally applicable to the gangster genre; yet

the solitary hero of the western is replaced by the gangster over-reacher who seeks ultimate power and control but remains reliant upon the group for his power *and* for his identity. In this respect the gangster archetype offers an even more fitting genre realisation of a protagonist like King Lear whose persona is intrinsically linked to his place within the hierarchy. In cinematic off-shoots which adopt the gangster genre template, the gangster patrician's attempts to extricate himself from the burdens of leadership set in motion his downfall, mirroring closely both the character constructs created in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and the play's preoccupation with the dramatisation of the demise of patriarchal and familial institutions, whether situated in a legitimate world or an underworld. However, what marks out the gangster scenario as the most fitting of genre templates for screen adaptations of *King Lear* is its propensity for violent excess and its interrogation of the kind of evil embodied in Shakespearean and Jacobean tragedy – an evil which “must perforce prey upon itself like monsters of the deep”(4.2:50-51).

¹ Steve Chibnall, “Travels in Ladland: The British Gangster Cycle 1998-2001,” *The British Cinema Book* (2nd edition), ed. Robert Murphy (London: 2001), p.282.

² “A Revenger’s Tragedy - Get Carter,” Robert Murphy, *British Crime Cinema*, eds. Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy (London and New York: 1999), p.132.

³ Robert Warshow, “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” *The Immediate Experience* (New York, 1970), p.127-133.

⁴ Richard Burt, *Shakespeare the Movie II*, eds. Richard Burt and Linda Boose (London, 2003), p. 178.

⁵ Neil Sinyard, “The Postmodern Populism of *Looking For Richard*,” *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle*, eds. Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, 2000), p.67.

⁶ Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh, 2005), p. 138.

⁷ Ibid., p.142.

⁸ Ibid., pp.142-143.

⁹ Maynard Mack, *King Lear in Our Time* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2965), p.117.

¹⁰ Thomas Schatz, “Hollywood Genres: Film Genre and Genre Film,” *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Martin Cohen (Oxford, 2004), pp. 697-698..

¹¹ James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley, London:1998), p.9-11

¹² Foster Hersch, DVD commentary, *House of Strangers*.

¹³ Naremore, p.221.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.222.

¹⁵ Hersch.

¹⁶ Schatz, p.695.

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- ¹⁷ Langford, p.142.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p.141.
- ¹⁹ Hersch.
- ²⁰ Tony Howard, "Shakespeare's Cinematic Off-shoots, *From Play-script to Screenplay*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge: 2000), p.297.
- ²¹ Michael Schumacher, *Francis Ford Coppola: a Film-makers Life* (New York: 1999), p.89.
- ²² Ibid., p.89
- ²³ Ibid., p.115
- ²⁴ Ibid., p.94.
- ²⁵ *The Godfather* also alludes to *Henry V*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III*: Michael Corleone can be seen as a pseudo Hal who returns to his preordained 'duties', an ambitious over-reacher, and a cunning strategist as suggested by Neil Sinyard in "The Postmodern Populism of Looking for Richard."
- ²⁶ Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola, *Screenplay: The Godfather, Part Two* (2nd draft Sept. 1973).
[www.awesomefilm.com/script/godfather2html\(8/9/06\)](http://www.awesomefilm.com/script/godfather2html(8/9/06))
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Schatz, p. 695.
- ³⁰ Don Boyd, audio commentary, *My Kingdom* (2001).
- ³¹ Producer, audio commentary, *My Kingdom* (2001).
- ³² Courtney Lehmann, "The Postnostalgic Renaissance: The 'Place' of Liverpool in Don Boyd's *My Kingdom*," *Screening Shakespeare in the Twenty-first Century* (Edinburgh, 2006), pp. 72-73.
- ³³ Ibid., p.73.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p.73.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p.73.
- ³⁶ Don Boyd, DVD Commentary, *My Kingdom* (2001).
- ³⁷ DVD Commentary, *My Kingdom* (2001).
- ³⁸ Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy, "Introduction," eds. *British Crime Cinema* (London and New York: 1999), p.4.
- ³⁹ Don Boyd, DVD Commentary, *My Kingdom* (2001).
- ⁴⁰ Langford, p.141.
- ⁴¹ Langford, p.141.
- ⁴² Lehmann, p.74.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p.74.
- ⁴⁴ Chibnall, "Travels in Ladland," p. 281-288.
- ⁴⁵ Lehmann, pp.72-73.
- ⁴⁶ Chibnall, p.287.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p.287.
- ⁴⁸ Peter Bradshaw, "My Kingdom: Review," *The Guardian*, Friday, October 11th, 2002.
- ⁴⁹ Mike Clark, "Harris Rules in *Kingdom*," *USA Today*
<http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2002> (23/9/06)
- ⁵⁰ John Hill, "British Gangster Films of the 1980s," *British Crime Cinema*, eds. Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy (London, New York: 1999), pp.162-168.
- ⁵¹ Chibnall and Murphy, *British Crime Cinema*, p.5.
- ⁵² Howard, p.297.

Chapter Three: “Trashing the Cozy Citadel of Narrative Film.”¹

3.1 *King Lear* Goes ‘Art House’

According to film academic David Bordwell, the “slogan” for art house cinema should be “When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity;” what we are engaged in when ‘reading’ such films is a process of “watch[ing] less for the tale than the telling.”² Unlike genre cinema, the art house product revels in its capacity to exude uniqueness and thus to acquire an aesthetic that is seemingly denied the genre specific film. Works of ‘high art’ of the kind supposedly typified by art house cinema are “defined by [a] desire to be uncaused and unfamiliar”³ and as such may sit uneasily with cinematic transformation of Shakespeare’s plays which are characterised by their hybridity, their reliance upon established narrative forms and their initially populist intent, despite their author’s posthumously acquired classic iconic status. Some inventive art house offshoots are able to present us with cinematic interpretations which imbibe the ideological concerns found in the Shakespearean source text in a way that conservative heritage renditions seeking fidelity to Shakespeare’s text do not, but there are a number of *avante garde* ‘takes’ on Shakespeare’s *King Lear* which, for various reasons, fail to engage with the source text’s narrative, its language or its thematic and ideological preoccupations to telling effect.

Whilst Shakespeare’s narratives are of a classical story design the art house film works in opposition to that narrative mode, standing against the kind of cause and effect momentum once seen as central to mainstream genre cinema. Instead, the art film replaces ‘story’ with “authorial expressivity”, a “drifting episodic” treatment of narrative time and space, and “psychologically complex characters” whose conflicts are internalised.⁴ However, despite its claims to ‘uniqueness’, such cinema is as redolent with viewing conventions and stylistic principles as the most hybrid of

genre offerings. *Each* type of cinema has its “mode of cinematic discourse.”⁵ The art house ‘author’/ filmmaker becomes a central unifying force within the film’s structure, his style signature an expected ‘convention’ within the narrative, his means of telling the tale as important - if not more so - than the story he relates. Its one “grand” and “distinguishing convention” according to screenwriter Robert McKee is its “unconventionality.”⁶

McKee claims that the art film has become just as traditional as any other genre, adopting one of two sub-genres - minimalism or anti-structure - as its template.⁷ It could also be argued that the division between art house cinema and the more mainstream ‘indie’ film products of the nineties onwards is dissolving rapidly; the kind of fragmented, non-linear narratives and authorial style signatures of the art house film are now prevalent in films frequented by mainstream audiences. The mainstream, award-winning success of a director like Alejandro González Iñárritu, whose films *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), and *Babel* (2006), present a series of disjointed narratives framed within a distinctive authorial style, demonstrates the cross-over between what was once art house territory and a more challenging cinema which appeals to a wider, increasingly film-literate cinema-going audience of the new millennium. Writing in *The Times* recently, film critic Kevin Maher argues that there has been “a complete dissolution of the barriers between so-called mainstream and art-house film-making,” heralded in part by the rise of DVD culture and the global consumption of movies.⁸ Certainly, Inárritu’s eclectic casting in *Babel* - with Hollywood stars like Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett playing alongside non-actors and ‘indie’ favourite Gael García Bernal – points to a merging of the various filmic classifications, and leads us to question the validity of categorising film products specifically as art-house as opposed to mainstream, or belonging to one

genre rather than another. However, such classifications continue to provide meaningful critical constructs for debate about film and there are still films which, according to their makers, not only remain outside the mainstream but relish their anti-genre stance.

In addition to Peter Brook's *King Lear* (1971), several other 'art house' takes on the Lear myth have emerged during the course of the last forty years: Steve Rumbelow's *King Lear* (1976), French New Wave auteur Jean Luc Godard's *King Lear* (1987), and Dogme 'brother' Kristian Levring's *The King Is Alive* (2000) operate beyond the realms of mainstream genre cinema, and are stylistically experimental, with accepted film grammar and narrative expectations being outlawed to varying degrees. Brook's art house version of *Lear* stands in artistic and cinematic opposition to the safe costume drama renditions of the previous decade: it offers a different yet intelligible way of reading the Shakespearean source text and reflects the apocalyptic preoccupations of its era of production. His experimental treatment of the Lear myth owes much to the early counter cinematic filmmaking practices of Jean Luc Godard. He foregrounds the processes of storytelling, creating a fragmented, nihilistic image system through use of non-conventional framing and editing, yet retains the narrative momentum more readily associated with classical narrative forms. However, 'narrative cinema' is 'trashed' by Rumbelow and Godard in their pursuit of a much more abstract and far less successful exploration of the Shakespearean source text. As a film Rumbelow's *King Lear* has no generic placement within the industry and even as an ambiguous art house offering it has certain limitations. Brook's capacity to differentiate between the very different signifying systems of stage and screen enables him to work to great effect within the realms of experimental cinema, whereas Rumbelow's overt reliance upon both the

theatrical origins of his Artaud-inspired stage version of *King Lear* and his audience's detailed prior knowledge of Shakespeare's play text ensures the failure of its transition to screen.

By the mid 60s Godard's stylistic preoccupations become more pronounced, moving him away from early French new wave "story films" like *A Bout de Souffle* (1959). *Alphaville* and *Pierrot le fou* (1965) mark his increasing departure from films where the story is "occasionally interrupted or undercut by non-narrative devices," to films like *La Chinoise* (1967) in which narrative has been displaced by the director's obsession with digression.⁹ Unfortunately, his 'adaptation' of *King Lear* is marked by a similar obsession with non-narrative devices and inexplicable digression: the tale is overwhelmed by Godard's desire to parody the commercial film industry, the narrative structure is sacrificed to disconnected and episodic fragmentation. Conversely, there remains a reverence for storytelling in Leving's *The King Is Alive* which, as with Brook's *King Lear*, lifts it out of the realms of such art house abstraction, engaging us instead in a more meaningful, dramatic dialogue with Shakespeare's language and ideas. Unlike Godard, Leving allows his desire to relate an interesting tale to override his desire to conform to abstract ideals, one of which, embodied in the rules-based Dogme manifesto, states that genre is the enemy.¹⁰

In theory all four films work to defy conventional genre definition; in practice, even to adopt an anti-genre position results in the production of a particular kind of film which may, over time, be seen to operate within the confines of a preconceived set of codes and conventions. By 'trashing the citadels of narrative cinema' Rumbelow and Godard create minimalist anti-structures which also 'trash' the cogency of Shakespeare's narrative design and whilst to deconstruct Shakespeare's classic story design is not in itself a negative - Brook's nihilistic, experimental *King*

Lear and Levring's highly successful reworking of elements of the *Lear* narrative serve to illustrate this point - to do so without replacing it with any kind of meaningful alternative is not. Yet in its anti-genre posturing *and* its denial of auteurist influence¹¹ the Dogme new wave presents us with an enigma: how should such filmmaking be classified? It is meant to be a democratising movement aimed at releasing film from the technological and financial fascism of Hollywood; it seeks to avoid what it sees as the sensationalistic, narrative redundancy of genre cinema¹² but also abhors the kind of 'intellectualism' seen to be at the core of art house cinema.¹³ Furthermore, Levring readily concedes that the Dogme new wave will eventually engender a type of filmmaking which is as convention-ridden as mainstream genre cinema,¹⁴ and contrary to the rules outlined in the Dogme brethren's Vow of Chastity - "Rule Ten: The director shall not be credited -"¹⁵ he claims they are motivated by a desire to "get back to auteur thinking," film being "the director's medium."¹⁶ Indeed, as with Brook, the experimental influences of an early Jean Luc Godard are at work in the *The King is Alive* and Levring claims Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (1960) "the best dogme film that could be made,"¹⁷ despite the fact that it was produced thirty six years prior to the birth of the Dogme new wave and its 'Vow' of filmmaking 'Chastity'. The Dogme 'brethren' may provide a much needed challenge to the present status quo within a Hollywood dominated film industry - and it is difficult to know whether their disavowal of all things genre and all things Hollywood is sincere or merely a marketing ploy used to drum up interest in their film product¹⁸ - but, despite the radical rhetoric of their manifesto, their ideas and motivations tend merely to echo those of bygone eras.

Similarly, the style signature and narrative intransitivity of the art house film presents us with nothing as radical as a 'non-generic' film product: it is as convention-

bound as the action film or the western in its own way, even though there remains a wider spectrum of creative 'difference' within the art house 'genre'. Both Bordwell and McKee cite genre director Alfred Hitchcock as one who transcends the boundaries between art and mainstream genre cinema. He represents the "merger of classical narrative and art-film narration,"¹⁹ and marries art with popular success, countermanding the flawed assumption that there is a *necessary* connection between art and the Art Film.²⁰ And there is a fine line to be drawn between auteurism and genre: when, one may ask, does the signature style of an 'auteur' become so predictable that it verges on the replication of the same kind of conventional coding and patterning as a piece of genre cinema? One can only wonder what form a Hitchcockian adaptation of *King Lear* would have taken but it is probable that it would be a work of *art* rooted in *genre* conventions.

¹ Richard Corliss, "Mad Monarch as Gang Lord," *Time*, Vol. 131, No. 5, Feb 1st, 1988, p.71.

² David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism*, Vol. IV, No. 1, Fall, 1979.

³ Leo Braudy, *Film Theory and Criticism* (Sixth Edition), eds. Leo Braudy and Martin Cohen (Oxford, 2004), p.658.

⁴ Bordwell, pp. 57-58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.57.

⁶ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (London, 1999), p.88.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.86.

⁸ Kevin Maher, "How We Learned to Love Subtitles," *The Times*, April 12th, 2007.

⁹ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Paris Match: Godard and Cahiers," *Sight & Sound*, June 2001.

¹⁰ Dogme Vow of Chastity, Rule 8: Genre movies are not acceptable. <http://www.dogme95.dk>, 1/10/06

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Rule 10: The director must not be credited.

¹² *Ibid.*, Rule 6: The film must not contain superficial action; & 7: Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden.

¹³ Kristian Levring, interview with Richard Kelly, *The Name of the Book is Dogme95*, Richard Kelly (London, 2002), pp.213-214.

¹⁴ Levring in Kelly, p.54.

¹⁵ Dogme Vow of Chastity.

¹⁶ Levring in Kelly, pp.54-55.

¹⁷ Levring in Kelly, p.45.

¹⁸ Kelly, p.88.

¹⁹ Bordwell, p.62.

²⁰ McKee, p.89.

3.2 Peter Brook's *King Lear* (1971)

3.2 (i) "A Hollywood Showman's Nightmare?"¹

Peter Brook's film adaptation of *King Lear* (1971) is regarded as part of the 'canon' of Shakespeare on screen and although influenced by his earlier staging of *King Lear* for the RSC in 1962, his film is far from a transcription of this theatrical production. It stands as an independent work of cinematic art that has more in common with Crisis Cinema than with conventional screen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Contrary to the claims made by many Shakespeare scholars, Brook's main preoccupation when adapting *King Lear* for the screen lies with cinematic experimentation rather than issues related to the theatre. For Brook, "the medium is the message"² and when operating within the very different creative realm of screened Shakespeare he adopts experimental counter cinematic techniques more readily associated with the work of the French New Wave than with theatrical practices or cinematic genre renditions of Shakespeare's works. His film plays with the classical design of *King Lear*; and Lear's conflict is internalised to a much greater extent in this treatment, whilst the rules of linear time and causality are unhinged by the use of silence, gaps in the narrative, and disjointed images created through experimental cinematography and editing techniques. There is a purposely engineered lack of closure, fuelled by Brook's existentialist interpretation of the source text and this minimalist approach places the film beyond the realms of the mainstream cinema audience. In creating his film adaptation, Brook, like fellow screenplay adapters, engages with the recurring problem of how to translate the complexities of Shakespearean imagery into a similarly dense on-screen image system, but his end product defies the

expectations of mainstream cinema and pushes the boundaries of what may be considered part of the 'canon' of Shakespeare on screen.

Brook built his reputation in the theatre and his association with the RSC adds cultural capital to his film adaptation of *King Lear*. However, his involvement in film-making precedes his screen production of *King Lear* and his earlier films, especially those of the sixties, are similarly experimental adaptations: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Brook's most well known film, was adapted for screen in 1963 and was shot in grainy black and white stock by a non-professional crew using non-professional actors, aiming for a documentary feel; Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* (1967), initially a stage production directed by Brook, is one of his most experimental pieces, heralded as "a new cinematic form in seventeen sequences;"³ shortly before completing *King Lear*, Brook's *Tell Me Lies* (1968), a docu-drama exploring anti-Vietnam sympathies, was adapted from Dennis Cannan's stage play. Brook's *Marat/Sade*, *Tell Me Lies* and *King Lear* belong to a decade of what Robert Murphy terms "pessimistic cinema" spanning the mid sixties to the mid seventies; despite the mythical belief that it was a time of unparalleled optimism in British film - with the emergence of *Bond* and *Carry-On* films - films like Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) and even swinging sixties films like *Up The Junction* (1968) contain "disturbing undertones."⁴

British film-making was moving away from Kitchen Sink dramas inherited from the Free Cinema of the fifties and a well-intentioned art house agenda did emerge, but funding and distribution of art house films remained problematic in an era of diminishing cinema audiences.⁵ The experimental form of both Donald Cammell's and Lindsay Anderson's *If* (1968), with its surreal images, and Nicolas Roeg's *Performance* (1970), alluding to high and pop art culture, suggests art

house cinema was still thriving⁶ in the decade surrounding the release of Brook's experimental *King Lear*, but the extent to which Britain was capable of sustaining an art house edge was viewed with scepticism by many, caught as it was between "Hollywood commercialism" and "Europe's artistic seriousness."⁷ The emergence of the London Film-Makers Co-Op in 1966 saw a determined attempt to establish an *avant-garde* cinema in Britain, the dominant emphasis being on "formal experiment and the deconstruction of popular cinematic codes and conventions."⁸ Its stress upon the technical devices of image production was intended to encourage audiences to actively make meaning from the images, and a similar intent can be found in Brook's *King Lear*. The seventies heralded a decade of change and insecurities for the British film industry⁹ but Brook continued to adopt an experimental approach to his film projects, ensuring that his screen adaptations, whether from play or novel, became independent art forms operating in the very different medium of film.

Brook's preoccupation with film form is of paramount importance to an understanding of his adaptations and yet it is a consideration often overlooked by Shakespeare critics. His *King Lear* is unlike other screen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in this era. Franco Zeffirelli's realist versions of *The Taming of the Shrew* (1966) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) conform to heritage genre expectations and embrace the epic grandeur of the screen, as does Stuart Burge's *Julius Caesar* (1970) with its all-star Hollywood cast. Tony Richardson's *Hamlet* (1969) is a more restrained, claustrophobic film, sharing the darker undertones of Brook's *King Lear*, but it remains a period piece and conforms to the expected conventions of film grammar in a way that Brook's film does not. Similarly, Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971) has as much in common with his earlier film

Repulsion as it does with Heritage Shakespeare, thus placing it outside the realms of period drama to a certain extent, yet it still operates within the boundaries of mainstream cinema in an historically specific time-frame. The less mainstream influences of Brook and Michael Birkett, who were involved at production level, are evident in Peter Hall's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1968); however, it is not until the 1971 release of *King Lear* that Shakespeare on screen takes an 'art house' turn.

Brook's *King Lear* has more in common with the apocalyptic images of Crisis Cinema than with its Shakespeare on screen counterparts. The late sixties saw a rise in films of an apocalyptic nature in both European and American cinema. Films like Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) form part of a progressive yet brief period in American cinematic history when film-making became artistically ambitious, and the film's violent apocalyptic non-Hollywood closure shares striking similarities with Brook's rendition of *King Lear* where the emphasis is upon death, futility and emotional bankruptcy. Richard Lester's British film, *The Bed-Sitting Room* (1969), presents an apocalyptic and absurdist vision in which people metamorphose into objects in a bizarre post-holocaust world though, unlike *Bonnie and Clyde*, it was destined to be a box office failure,¹⁰ despite Lester's earlier successes with films like *A Hard Day's Night* (1964). The significance of the apocalyptic image in art can be traced back to the silent era, beginning with *The Comet* (1910) and progressing to films like *Metropolis* (1926), to the point where apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic images form part of the 'zeitgeist' of contemporary cinema.¹¹ Even mainstream science fiction and horror genres became more negatively apocalyptic in the sixties, shifting from a fifties depiction of surmountable images of apocalypse associated

with the Cold War and external foes in such films as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), to what James Combs terms “a catastrophe that is internally-induced.”¹² The apocalyptic visions at the core of *King Lear* are accentuated by Brook to the exclusion of the redemptive possibilities inherent in Shakespeare’s text, exploring the protagonist’s internal conflict as a projection of catastrophe and mirroring a contemporary preoccupation with apocalyptic fears. Brook’s adaptation also shares with Crisis Cinema a sense of the absurd, and of the diminishing powers of patriarchal systems leading, according to Christopher Sharrett, to “profound nullity and bankruptcy,”¹³ a nullity shared by Brook’s interpretation of *King Lear* and often reflected in the intentional bankruptcy of the on-screen images he constructs.

Brook’s position is documented in an interview conducted by Geoffrey Reeves in 1966, prior to production of his *King Lear*: he talks at great length about the relationship between play script and film as a medium, providing an invaluable insight into his role as an adapter of Shakespearean text.¹⁴ Unlike other directors of Shakespeare on screen, Brook has no desire to create what he calls “actor-manager pieces” in which the camera simply *serves* the actors’ performances in “traditional nineteenth century Shakespearean interpretations.”¹⁵ Instead, like Kozintsev, Brook believes the film director should realise his *own* conception with utter clarity.¹⁶ This sets them apart from film-makers who seek to recreate the mythical Elizabethan/Jacobean world of Shakespeare and his contemporaries in all of its period costume glory. Brook refuses to operate within the confines of the ‘Shakespeare’ or Heritage genre, consciously denying what Jorgens terms the “decorative spectacle”¹⁷ audiences have come to associate with adaptations of Shakespeare to the screen, and rejecting the notion that

Shakespeare's 'Elizabethan England' can be literally recreated on stage or screen. Filmed in the frozen wastelands of Northern Jutland between January and April, 1968, the locale of his *King Lear* remains purposely anonymous, devoid of cultural reference points and historical certainties. Through its non-localized nature, Brook is aiming to explore the same endless possibilities which were available in the Elizabethan theatre - as opposed to Elizabethan England - investing his film with the same flexibility as the former in *more* than a physical sense:

I think that the freedom of the Elizabethan theatre is still only partially understood, people having got used to talking in clichés about the non-localized stage. What people do not fully realise is that the non-localized stage means that every single thing under the sun is possible, not only quick changes of location: a man can turn into twins, change sex, be his past, his present, his future, a comic version of himself and a tragic version of himself, and be none of them, all at the same time.¹⁸

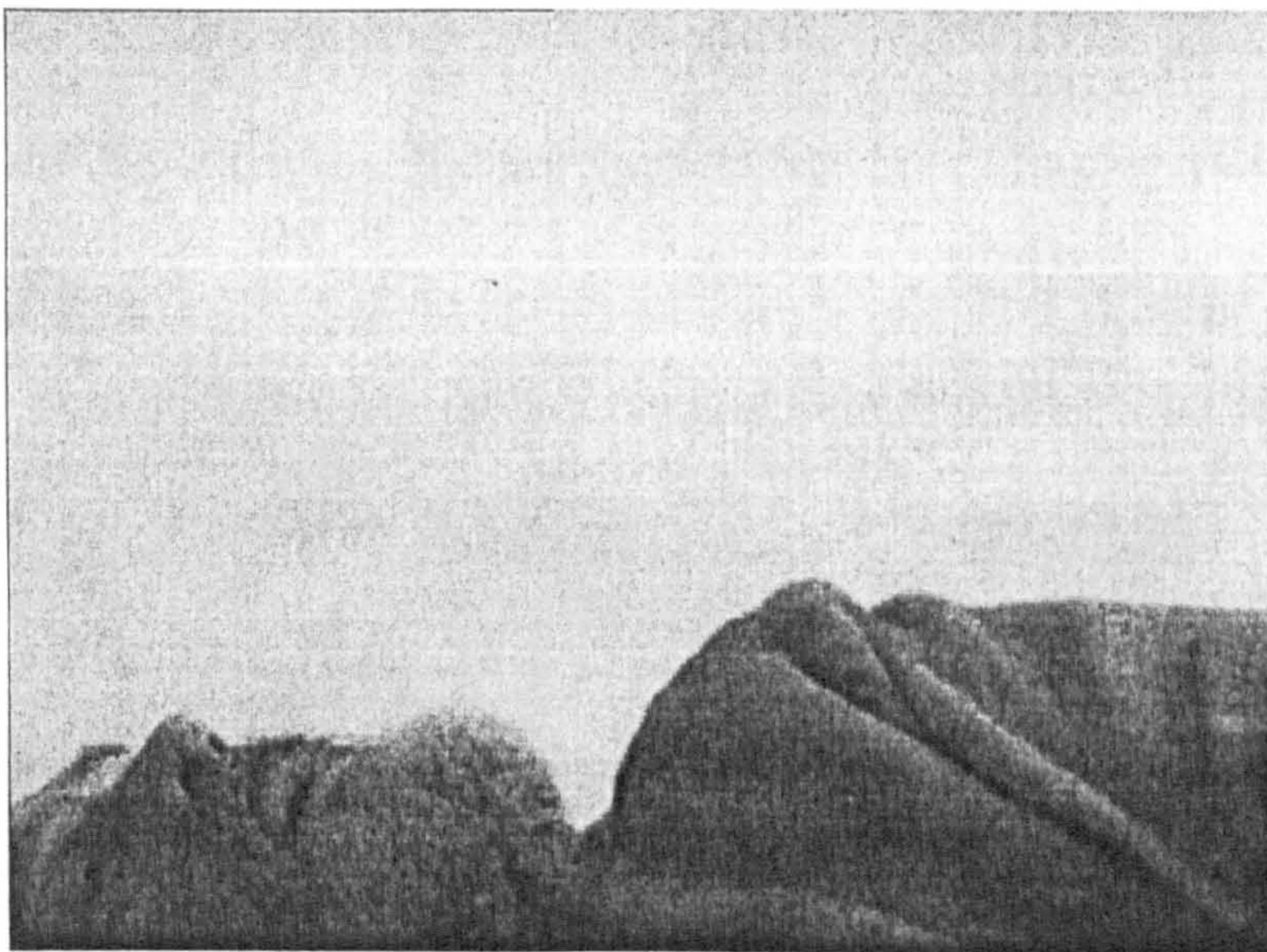
Michael Birkett, producer of *King Lear*, asserts their intention to avoid the kind of "authenticity" that turns Shakespeare on screen into a museum piece, creating instead "a setting dictated not by the nature of a particular moment in history, but by the nature of the play"¹⁹ being dealt with, and thus allowing Brook to realise his *own* conception of the play. Whilst Shakespeare's narratives conform to classical story design, Brook acknowledges that they also lend themselves to other than a classical Hollywood screen rendition; they are redolent with surreal

images and an anarchic potential which he exploits to the full in his screen adaptation. The shooting script contains numerous references to the increasingly surreal nature of the images, as they become “less and less narrative, more and more strange, surrealist though never apparently fantastic.”²⁰ Kent’s transformation scene at the start of Act One, Scene Four demonstrates Brook’s capacity to utilise expressionistic cinematography to reflect the psyche of his characters. The on-screen images are fragmented through his use of jump cuts and a blurring of the focus, the camera zooming into and out of the image as if reflecting the pauses and shifts within Kent’s mind in a style reminiscent of the stream-of-consciousness employed in prose writing.

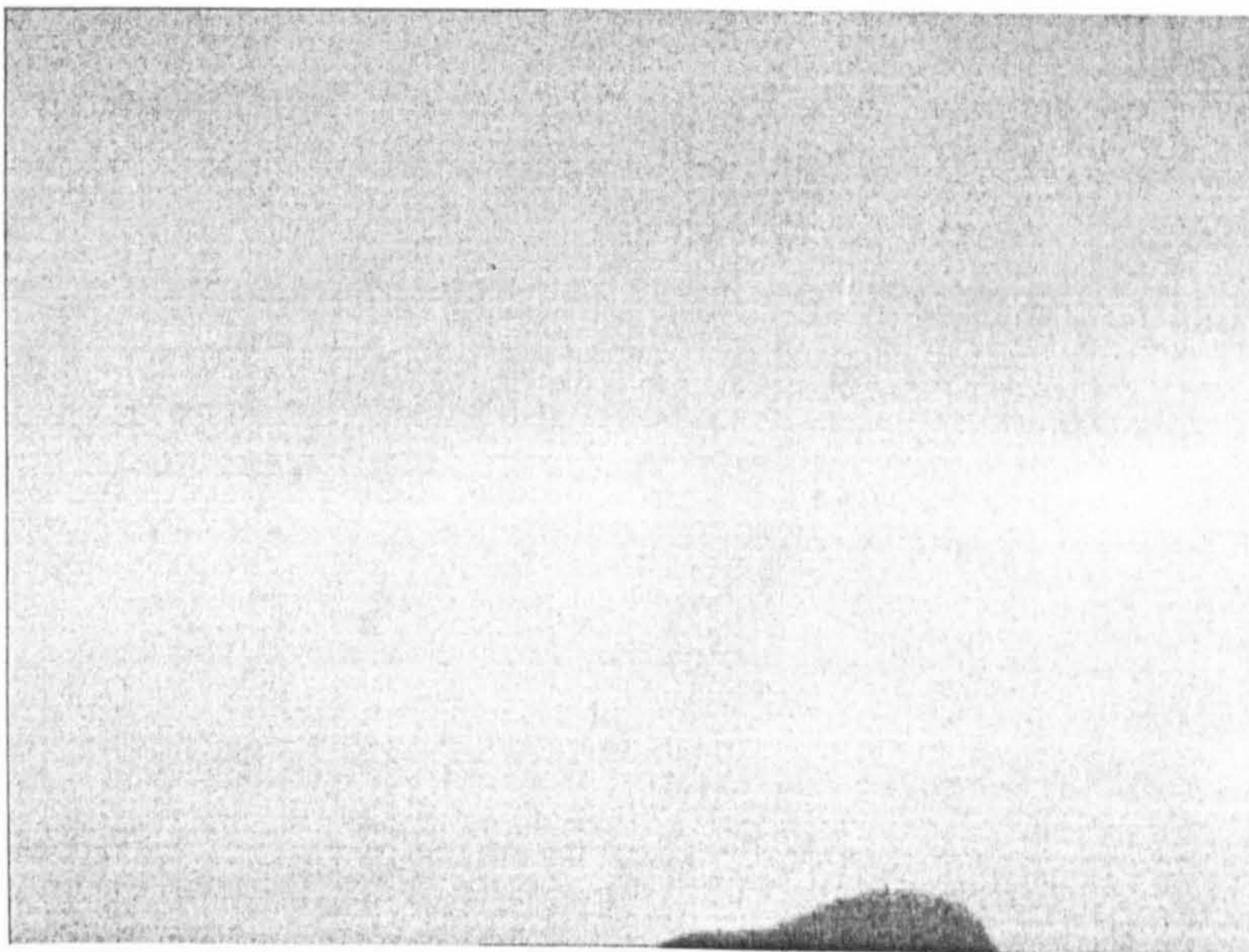
Costuming is similarly non-committal, placing the protagonists within a primordial setting but denying anything more specific than that: Lear and his courtiers appear in sack cloth, Lear’s costuming singling him out only by the enormous furs he wears in the opening moments of the film. Brook remains wary of establishing a “plausible world”²¹ which may impede exploration of a text’s complexities. He creates a relatively blank canvas, peopled by characters whose stature and relationships are communicated not by their costuming or props but by their performance and their interaction with the camera and its cuts. In doing so, he is criticised for failing to exploit the visual potential of film: he does deny us the standard visual shorthand provided by a loaded *mise-en-scène* - his sets are minimalistic and stark - and shots encompassing the epic grandeur of landscapes or castles symbolic of royal power form no part of Brook’s filmscape. But his choices are an integral part of his overall conception of the film: his approach is minimalist, experimental, and nihilistic in the extreme.

Brook's directorial intent has been debated at length by critics, some condemning him for concentrating upon the text's nihilistic elements to the exclusion of the redemptive properties inherent in Shakespeare's play,²² whilst others claim it is a film which "offers more Beckett and Brecht than Shakespeare."²³ His interpretation is clearly influenced by Kott's reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the theatre of Samuel Beckett.²⁴ *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* possess the same absurdist moments, the same explorations of nullity, the same examinations of the fragility of humankind as Shakespeare's *King Lear*, each being preoccupied with the 'nothingness' at the heart of human existence. Brook transforms the play from Tragedy to Grotesque, resulting in its cathartic and redemptive elements being underplayed and leaving us in a world devoid of consolation in line with Kott's interpretation of the text. Lear is presented as an overbearingly dominant patriarch with few redeeming qualities and any journeying towards redemption is undermined by the discomfiting inference that Lear has in some manner abused his daughters. Paul Scofield does not present us with a frail, perverse old Lear but with a strong, aggressive ruler who is enraged by the notion that he will no longer be obeyed in all things, and whilst he does learn about the injustices of his world during the course of his journey, he moves not towards his own redemption but towards inevitable annihilation. Lear's daughters are given a much more complex representation - the demon/ angel dichotomy is extinguished by the radical cutting of Cordelia's asides in Act One, Scene One, giving us less reason to doubt the veracity of the declarations of love given by Goneril and Regan, and adding credibility to the private conversation in which they voice their concerns about Lear's dubious dependability at the close of the scene.

Brook's apocalyptic reading of the text sees Lear slipping out of the frame at the close of the film, leaving us with a blank, white screen held for four seconds. The 'nothingness' at the core of the narrative is given an on-screen reality, suggesting that human life is insignificant and inconsequential. The closing dialogue of the source text is cut and all forms of life seem to be extinct: we are left waiting, in anticipation of what will come next, but the screen remains blank.



3.1 *King Lear* (1971)



3.2 *King Lear* (1971)

In the first shooting script of the film, Brook places Edgar “alone in the desert” speaking his closing lines to camera; his picture then vanishes, “until nothing has left a trace,”²⁵ which has a similar effect to the chosen final image. However, the emphasis shifts dramatically: with the demise of Lear as the focal point we also infer the demise of patriarchy and its corrupt institutions since Lear has become synonymous with paternal and institutional failure; with the disappearance of Edgar we infer that he will live on to perpetuate the system, becoming the next emotionally redundant figurehead of an institution riddled with betrayal. It suggests that the patterns will repeat themselves, especially given the callous edge of Brook’s Edgar who at times appears to collude with his brother in the harsh treatment of their father, casting him roughly aside when he dies and adding extra resonance to the notion that familial bonds are irredeemably broken in Lear’s world.

Brook’s own conception of the play is realised on-screen through risk-taking and experimentation with cinematic form. He rejects not only genre expectations but also mainstream cinematic expectations in pursuit of the essence of *his* interpretation of the source text. One of Brook’s major concerns revolves around what he sees as the “consistency” of film images; they are too concrete to convey the multi-layered meanings of Shakespearean verse:

The problem of filming Shakespeare is one of finding
ways to shift gears, styles and conventions as lightly
and deftly on screen as within the mental processes
reflected by Elizabethan blank verse onto the screen
of the mind.²⁶

In pursuit of this capacity to create on-screen images with the mobility and multiplicity of Shakespeare's verse, Brook toyed with the idea of creating a multi-screened projection, seeing it as "a way that Shakespeare might be *found* on film."²⁷ Employing techniques similar to those used by Abel Gance and the Cinerama would enable Brook to project the mental impression created by the verse:

You see the actor as a man standing in the distance,
and you also see his face, very close to you - perhaps
his profile and the back of his head at the same time -
and you also see the background... you can have heath
and the moment that a soliloquy begins you can drop
the heath out of the picture and concentrate on different
views of Gloucester. If you like, you can suddenly open
a caption, write a line, write a subtitle. If you want, in the
middle of a realistic action in colour you could have
another or the same in black and white and the third
captioned. You could have statistics or a cartoon
parodying the photographic action.²⁸

Today's cinema-going audience is far more film-literate and would not be surprised to find some of the devices Brook lists here employed in film. Movies as diverse as Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), Quentin Tarentino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996) make use of a variety of these counter cinema techniques. However, in the early seventies, Brook was fully aware of the economic restraints upon his experimental talents, concluding that whilst he could employ some of these counter cinema

techniques, the multi-screen concept would be "economically hard to realise."²⁹ Brook turned to directors like Godard and Antonioni for inspiration. According to Brook, Godard attacks the stability of the image or shot as a means to capturing its multiplicity; Antonioni accepts the stability of the shot but captures its invisible elements by employing a variety of devices; both, most importantly, reject the notion that an individual frame carries meaning by and of itself. Brook's constant use of static shots embellished by other 'devices' such as creative editing and the suggestive power of what lies beyond the frame is reminiscent of Antonioni's cinematic style. But he also employs the destabilizing techniques characteristic of Godard's style in an attempt to create his desired sense of fragmentation, disorientation and alienation, the latter being a device "of infinite possibilities...the only device which leads us back to the possibilities of blank verse."³⁰ Brook has been criticised for his dominant use of static shots,³¹ but such criticisms fail to take into account either the range and diversity of his cinematography or the rationale behind his cinematic style.

Initially, Brook's adaptation was conceived as a translation, Ted Hughes having been commissioned to rewrite the text, treating it as a "foreign classic."³² However, Brook then reassembled the play, using its narrative structure and returning to it for dialogue, but always with a view to a realisation of *his* conception of the story, and a conscious awareness of the need to create a cinematic image system as multi-layered and mobile as that of Shakespeare's stage play. Given his apocalyptic interpretation of the text, Brook's image system must somehow convey a sense of fragmentation and sterility and this he achieves not only through the minimalist nature of the set and costuming which characterised his stage play and his film, but also through his cinematography and

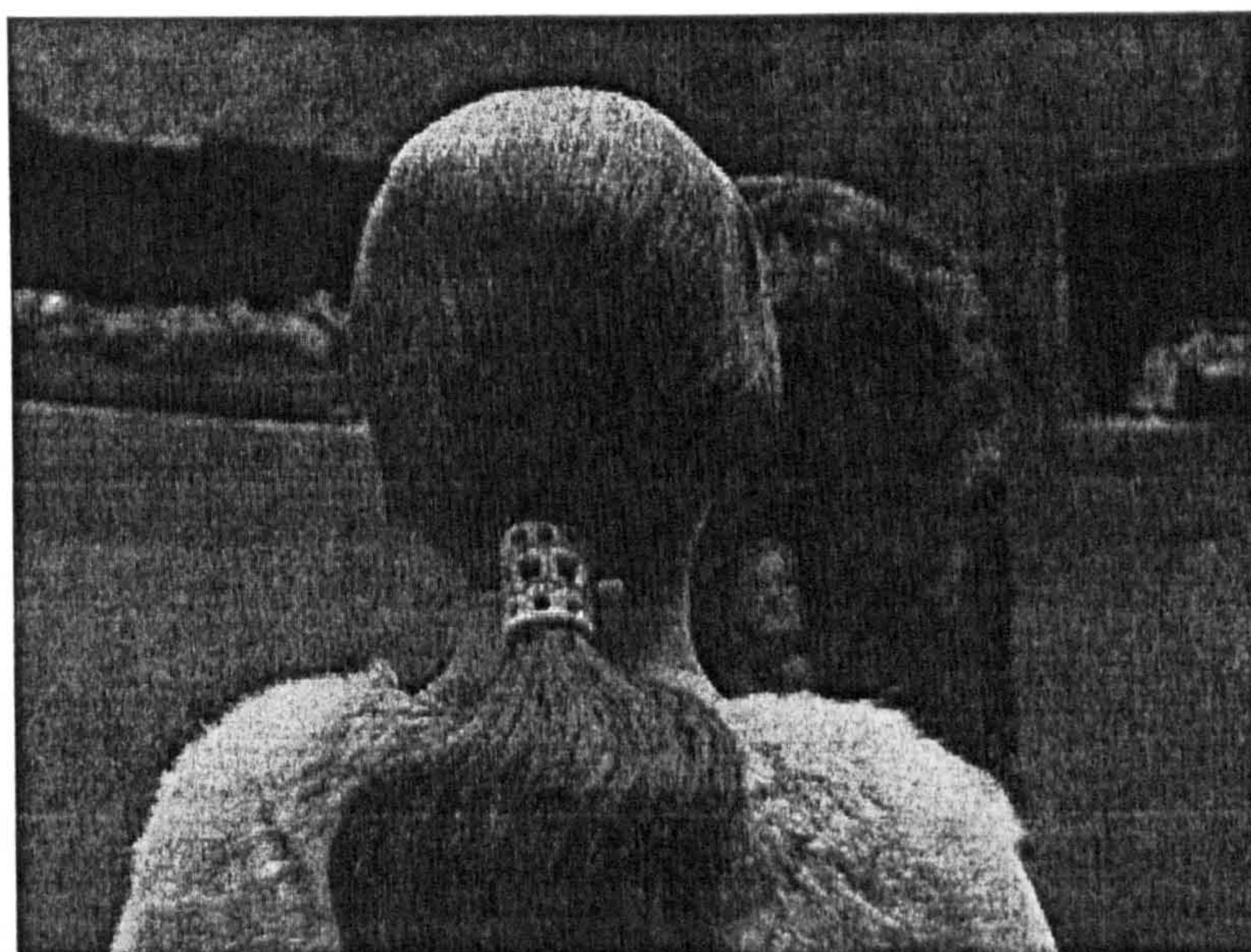
the ways in which he frames and edits the shots. The narrative transitivity of mainstream cinema, with its continuity editing and its explicit chain of causation, is rejected by Brook in favour of the kind of narrative intransitivity noted by critic Peter Wollen in the work of Jean Luc Godard.³³ Such an approach is engineered to distance spectators, constantly reminding them by interrupting the narrative, that what they are watching is a construct:

Alienation is above all an appeal to the spectator to work
for himself, so as to become more and more responsible for
accepting what he sees only if it is convincing to him.³⁴

Brook achieves this 'alienation' in numerous ways, by use of titles which tell us that we are, for example, at Goneril's castle or Gloucester's castle, or by interrupting the fluidity of the cinematography, employing canted shots and jump cuts which serve to disorientate the viewer, breaking the connection with the conjured world of the narrative, as is the case in the opening moments of the film when we jump cut from Lear to Regan to Cordelia and back to Lear, as if in the blinking of the spectator's eye. His approach to editing is similarly conditioned by a desire to interrupt narrative flow: in a letter to Grigori Kozintsev, Brook states that in the editing process "[they] are searching to interrupt the consistency of style, so that many-levelled contradictions of the play can appear."³⁵

He also frames shots in a way that suggests, at times, that we are standing behind characters, looking on from a distance rather than from an empathetic position, which again is characteristic of the counter cinematic techniques noted by Wollen in the works of Godard, where "estrangement" rather than "cinematic identification" is the desired effect.³⁶ When Lear responds to Cordelia's refusal to utter words of love with the line "Nothing will come of nothing,"³⁷ we cut to a

shot position directly behind Cordelia; we are denied access to her reaction and are forced to supplement this with our own.



3.3 *King Lear* (1971)

We have a clear focus on Cordelia in the foreground of the shot and yet it is the out of focus Lear who is speaking. Positioned as we are, behind Cordelia, we are distanced from her reaction and yet experience a kinaesthetic identification with her as the viciousness of Lear's language reaches us. In this, Brook shares with Godard a desire to establish an interactive relationship with the audience, to engage with it at the level of intellect rather than emotion, and in so doing create a hero who is *less* tragic as an individual yet *more* so as a construct representative of flawed humanity.

Whilst mainstream cinema requires us to identify with the protagonist, Brook's counter-cinematic approach aims for our estrangement and employs techniques such as direct address to camera, not as a means of giving us insight into the mind of characters, as is the function of the soliloquy in staged Shakespeare, but as a way of breaking the narrative surface. Often, Brook's

characters speak to camera when delivering lines of dialogue rather than soliloquies, forcing the audience into a discomforting viewing position and asking us to evaluate the truth of the spoken word as is the case when Lear's daughters are delivering , or with-holding, their affirmations of love to him in the opening scene. Similarly, when Lear delivers his vile tirade against Goneril at the end of Act One, Scene Four, Scofield delivers his lines direct to camera: the static nature of the extreme close up shot privileges the spoken word, forcing us to listen and to observe the 'language' of his performance in its finest detail. As viewers we are discomforted by his verbal onslaught, wanting to dissociate ourselves from his harsh language, but Brook demands our close engagement with the verse by the way he positions us in relation to the speaker. Russell Jackson notes that direct address to camera, when used to vocalize the soliloquy on screen, results in a "radical disruption of the sense of the fictional space,"³⁸ but Brook takes things a step further, utilizing this kind of "radical disruption" not only for delivery of soliloquies but for lines of crucial dialogue.

A tendency to foreground the processes of production is also present, Brook's cinematography being extremely visible, the camera moving in a continuous arc from one face to another to deliver reaction shots rather than employing the swift, seamless continuity edits we are so accustomed to in mainstream cinema. For example, in the initial confrontation scene (1.4) between Lear and Goneril, the camera movements are highly visible: we circle Lear as his anger mounts, continually shifting our viewing position between Albany, Goneril and Lear via the moving camera rather than through continuity editing. Brook's use of hand-held camera creates a documentary feel to certain scenes and though contemporary cinema audiences may be de-sensitised to this kind of

cinematography within narrative cinema, such a ploy was radical in an early seventies context. As Lear exits in 1.2, denouncing Goneril and Regan as 'Hags', the camera jolts and moves around, lending the scene a sense of documentary-style immediacy and creating a feeling of unpredictability via the cinematography. The distorted framing and the camera movement add to the fragmented image system, infusing it with layers of instability and menace. Often there is also a level of incompatibility between the on-screen image and its accompanying sound elements: Lear's storm scenes contain a number of shots where the voice beyond the frame dominates and contradicts the stillness of the on-screen image, adding once more to the destabilizing, disorientating elements within the sign system Brook constructs in this film. A total absence of musical score further underlines his desire firstly to deny conventional viewing expectations, and secondly to ensure that the word remains the dominant sound signifier.

Intertextual referencing is part of the substance of Godard's films, with lines of dialogue from other films and literary sources being quoted verbatim. Here, Brook makes assumptions that his audience will consider the film in relation to Shakespeare's version and probably various stage interpretations of the play, for without prior knowledge of the plot his film version of *King Lear* would remain incomprehensible due to gaps in the narrative. He is reliant upon the audience's capacity to make connections between the film world and the stage productions they are familiar with, resulting in the film's pseudo-intertextual potential - a potential that once again requires our active engagement with the film. For example, motivation for characters like Edmund, as the wronged son and champion of anti-heroes, is missing in the final film text; he remains an enigma, though the answers are made explicit in the classical narrative design of

the source text and in Brook's shooting scripts. Moreover, the intertextual references to the plays of Beckett create a dramatic overspill which invites the audience to make associations beyond the confines of this film world; the absurdity of the moment shared by Lear and Gloucester as they sit together on the open expanses of the beach in Act Four, Scene Six echoes Beckett's equally absurd moments of intimacy between Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting For Godot*. The lack of closure at the end of the film is also characteristic of counter cinema with its open-ended story lines and loose narrative threads. It stands in direct opposition to the kind of closure expected of mainstream cinema.

Brook is an adapter who is keenly aware of the film medium in which he is working. Yet many Shakespeare critics tend to read his film from the standpoint that he is first and foremost a theatre practitioner; they look for signs of his preoccupation with ways to recreate theatrical experience on screen. Anthony Davies, for example, claims that Brook "seeks to ensure the shared participative experience of theatre" and cites this as being the motivation behind Brook's desire to work outside cinematic conventions.³⁹ However, Brook is also an experienced film practitioner whose well documented ruminations about the medium itself suggest that his choices are not dictated by his preoccupation with the theatre but with new ways to create dramatic meaning on screen: to infer that his motivations are an extension of his theatrical practice is to undermine his worth as an experimental film-maker. What Brook realises in his *King Lear* is a sense of radical instability operating at a filmic and an ideological level; unlike the 'safer' genre renditions of Lear's story, *his* film reflects successfully the innate sense of *textual* instability found in Shakespeare's play and in so doing Brook creates a purposeful denial of assured interpretive positions in both texts.

3.2 (ii) An Unconscious Desire for Death: an illustrative analysis of the opening sequences

Brook's approach to the adaptation of Shakespeare's text is organic: firstly, we move from Hughes' translation, to Brook's extraction of the play's narrative elements, to the re-insertion of Shakespeare's verse; secondly, we move from the first draft of his shooting script (September, 1968)⁴⁰ to its second draft (December 1968),⁴¹ and finally to the on-screen image which has been modified throughout the filming and editing processes. There are a number of striking differences between shooting scripts and the finished film text, realised as part of the transformation from the static prose of the shooting script to the moving images negotiated via the cinematography and the editing. Brook claims it is not until Godard's cinema that we see "an attempt to get out of the prison of photographic naturalism."⁴² His intention to break with this 'photographic naturalism' is evident from the opening moments of the first shooting script:

On a blank screen, dots and blotches slowly materialise.

What are they? Like an enlargement at the moment

when the developer is just beginning to act, the disconnected

patches are tantalisingly enigmatic. We try to link them,

decide they make no sense, then suddenly from chaos a coherent

shape emerges. A pair of eyes....for a moment they are sharp

and clear... then they dissolve away again.⁴³

Immediately, the opening images signal a disruption of the viewing experience.

The focus upon the eyes foregrounds the recurring motif of 'seeing', reminding us

that we are participating in the act of intently watching something. The images

cannot hold: they struggle to maintain reality - a comment, perhaps, on the nature

of the medium and its incapacity to present the realism it aspires to. Further disjointed images "fade in and die away...define and destroy themselves,"⁴⁴ reinforcing a lack of visual and narrative clarity in the opening moments.

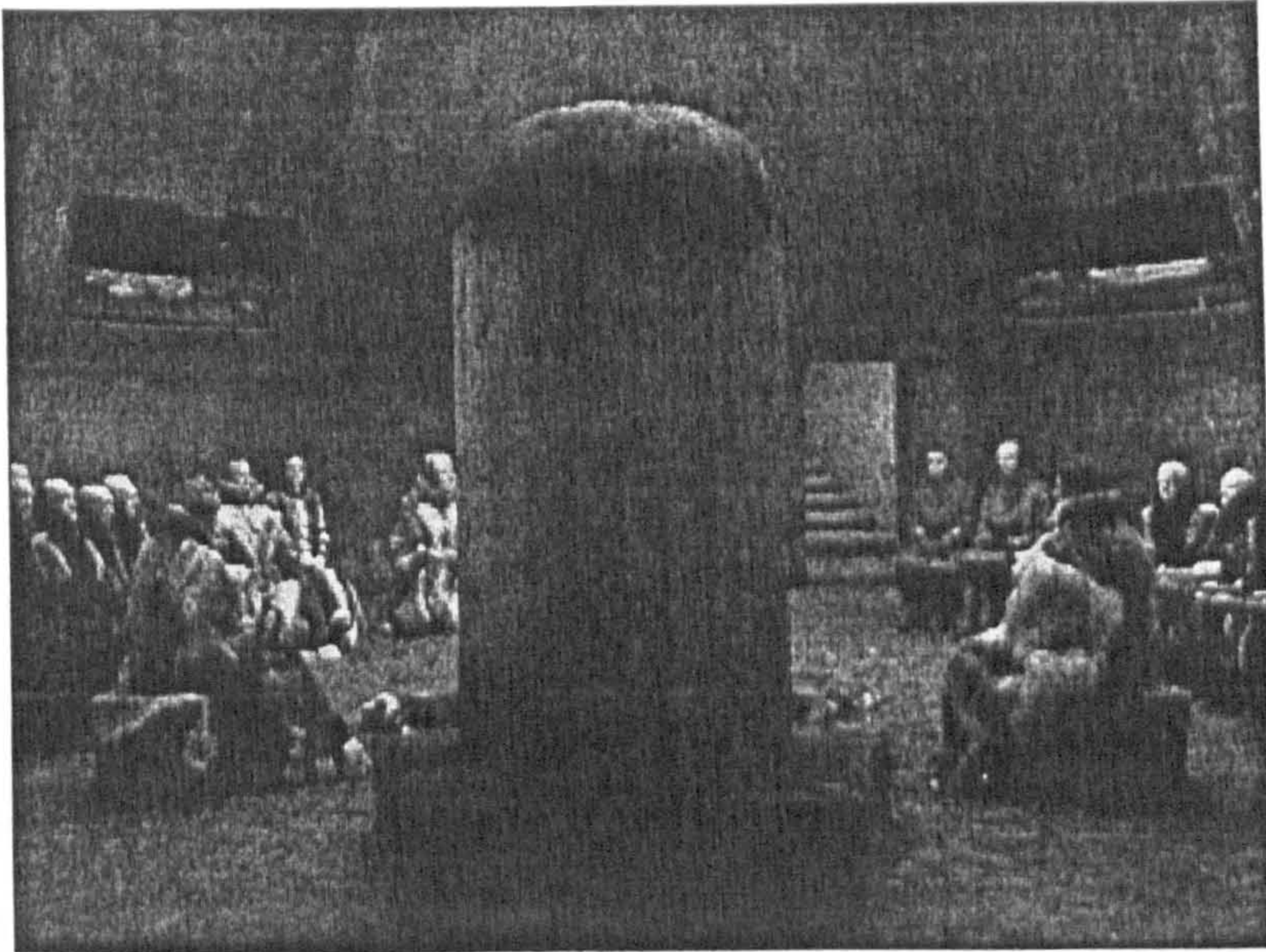
However, the final on-screen image bears no resemblance to these fragmented, disorientating establishing shots, despite their capacity to establish the over-riding sense of chaos at the core of Brook's interpretation. Instead, the establishing shots which make it to the screen strive to establish the feeling of inertia and of time suspended which permeates the whole film.

The opening moments illustrate the counter cinematic approach adopted by Brook as a means not only of realising his apocalyptic vision of *King Lear* but also of creating an on-screen image system as redolent with multiple meanings as Shakespeare's verse. The establishing shot tells us little about the locale: in a nullifying silence and shooting in grainy black and white film stock, we pan a freeze-frame tableau of faces devoid of expression. An overwhelming sense of inertia is immediately established as part of the film's image system, the first panning shot lasting for thirty seconds before we cut to the title which privileges the source text and its author, and capitalises on its cultural status. We then return to a reverse pan of the same frozen images, held for sixty-eight seconds, in what seems like an endless expanse of time. However, all faces now lean in one direction suggesting that something commands their gaze, something beyond the frame which as spectators we too turn to in anticipation, watching and waiting. The identity of the faces remains purposely ambiguous, though the second shooting script indicates that it is Lear's knights who are waiting outside, anxious about their predicament and conscious that great changes are imminent. As we edit to an interior shot this sense of inertia continues to overwhelm the stark,

shadowy set, dominated by a contradictory image of a tomb-like throne of phallic potency. We are conscious of the watching crowd at the edges of the frame, a consciousness which will permeate the whole film text, constantly engaging the audience with what lies outside the visual scope of the on-screen image as well as what is presented in each frame. Like Antonioni and Godard, Brook rejects the notion that an individual frame carries meaning by and of itself; by making his audience aware of the significance of what is happening beyond the confines of the individual frame, Brook invests each frame with a multiplicity of meanings.

Originally, Brook's *King Lear* was over three hours long but through the editing process became two hours, twelve minutes in the final cut. The shooting scripts include a much more detailed exploration of the relationship between Edgar and Edmund: we see Edgar riding out to meet Edmund and are presented with a picture of mutual brotherly love, *before* we are introduced to Lear and his division of the kingdom; and shortly after Goneril and Regan have left the ceremony in Goneril's coach, we cut to the brothers as they engage in a game of "wild horsemanship."⁴⁵ The scenes establish the ignomy of Edmund's later behaviour and his infamous "Now God stand up for bastards!" speech (1.2:22) is included, thus providing him with the motivation he is denied in the final cut of the film where spectators are left to fill in the narrative gaps. However, such inclusions run contrary to Brook's over-riding intent and have been omitted during the production process. Had they been included, the all-consuming focus on Lear and his daughters would have been diluted and some of the film's purposeful ambiguities dispelled.

All things wait on Lear as we cut to a shot from the rear of his throne, the camera holding the moment once more for a further twenty-three seconds, building on the sense of inertia established in the previous scene.



3.4 *King Lear* (1971)

We neither see nor hear from Lear during these moments of stillness; entombed in his coffin-like throne, his unconscious desire for death and annihilation is represented visually from the outset. However, the hierarchical positioning of others around his throne establishes a power structure with Lear at its apex and his importance is underlined by the way he continues to dominate film time. He is first presented in a static six second close up shot, its low angle allowing him to dominate the frame as he says : ‘Know’. All superfluous dialogue is cut so that the isolated word becomes more potent, invested in an aural sense with *both* of its inherent meanings and foregrounding at the outset Brook’s nihilistic and very negative take on the narrative. The shot is held for a further ten seconds, emphasising Lear’s control of all things, even time it seems. The eerie stillness and the starkness of the scene add a disturbing edge to the proceedings,

exacerbated by Scofield's monotonal, under-stated delivery. Even facial movement is minimal. The set is devoid of props, colour, depth of field, again adhering to Brook's desire to create visually the 'nothingness' at the core of human existence, but also signalling to us the importance of the spoken word and performance. In the original shooting script we first see Lear "impatient" and "energetic," as he "climb[s] onto his throne,"⁴⁶ but the on-screen representation presents us with an inert Lear whose stillness and isolation lend dramatic weight to the opening; entombed in his throne, he is an unseen, brooding presence who commands the silence that permeates the moment. Brook's original intent was to frame Lear alongside a "fussy and anxious"⁴⁷ Gloucester as Lear unrolls the map, but all changes at the production stage seem engineered to construct a more removed Lear, conscious of the way in which his position of power isolates him from all others, including his immediate family.

According to the shooting scripts, Brook's *mise-en-scène* was initially intended to be far more loaded and densely populated, giving a sense of the grandeur of the occasion and an outward display of Lear's wealth and status. In its final cut, there is no processional entrance and only a passing reference to the business of Cordelia's marriage to France or Burgundy. However, the first script speaks of one hundred knights, court secretaries, invited guests, whilst in the second script there is a much more detailed account of the room's décor, providing the kind of backdrop we would more readily expect of royal chambers and ceremonial gatherings:

This is a small hexagonal chamber, almost a vault. Its walls are lined with bronze and let into them, in deep shelves, are the mummified remains of previous kings. At one end, the

throne is backed and roofed in bronze, so that the king can sit inside it, like in an ancient studded chest.⁴⁸

Brook's decision to film the ceremony using a much more minimalist approach allows him to realise that on-screen 'nothingness' which is an essential part of his image system, though the inclusion of 'the mummified remains of previous kings' ranged on shelves would undoubtedly have added to Lear's presentation as a man already preoccupied with death. Lear's dialogue is also more extensive in both shooting scripts and by editing Brook ensures our focus upon elements *he* perceives as being central to its thematic concerns. To begin, as intended in the script, with "Give me the map" instead of "Know" resituates the thematic focus from a concern with 'nothingness' to a preoccupation with the redistribution of power. By opening with the word "Know," Lear's words are received as a command, an exercise not only of royal power but of fatherly power, the wisdom of which leads us to question the validity and the efficacy of the patriarchal power vested in him, exercised so randomly and without due care.

Apart from the throne, the coronet is the only prop invested with iconic value and it becomes a crucial emblem of Lear's royal power as he uses it to physically bestow the 'gift' of speech to his daughters. Given the overwhelming silence of the opening moments, we view the invitation to speak, and to legitimately break the silence Lear has presided over, as an act of empowerment. Though the act of gifting speech is both controlled and administered by men, it is the women and their reaction to this gift that forms the dramatic focus of the scene in Brook's film, shifting the emphasis from Lear and inviting the spectator to view proceedings from the perspective of the daughters, contrary to traditional readings of the text. Carol Rutter points out that it is during the opening moments

of the play that Lear realigns the power-base by firstly authorising female speech and secondly appropriating female speech for himself in the guise of curses.⁴⁹

Brook invests the ceremonious passing of the coronet and the ways in which it is handled by each of the daughters with a psychological subtext, communicated via his cinematography and his positioning of the camera's gaze. As Goneril steps up to play her part, she is positioned in the centre of the frame and looks with reverence at the coronet before lifting her gaze to Lear; her lingering look at the coronet, which remains in shot as a constant visual reminder, suggests that she is well aware of the power it represents, perhaps more so than Lear, and cannot quite believe he is so ready either to relinquish all that it stands for or to legitimise her speech in this public arena. Goneril speaks to camera, positioning us with Lear and inviting us to judge the truth of her declarations of love for ourselves. Her delivery is measured, monotonal, well rehearsed, and it is the first of many direct addresses to camera intended to disorientate the spectator and to disrupt our relationship with the fictional world.



3.5 *King Lear* (1971)

It places us in a viewing position which is much more exposed than the distanced act of theatrical watching: like Cordelia, positioned in the background of the shot, we focus intently upon Goneril's performance. The only telling sign of hesitation comes in delivery of the closing line when, after declaring "Beyond all manner of so much I love you,"(1.1:61) Goneril's lips seem to move without articulating, as if she is unsure whether she has said what will please him. Male control is still evident in these opening moments: the conch-like coronet is passed by Kent and Gloucester at Lear's bidding and Goneril, once she has delivered her speech, instantly seeks assurance from her husband that she has performed well, his hand resting on her knee, her gaze seeking his. It seems that until licensed by Lear to speak she has been a far more compliant woman. However, from this point onwards Goneril's control of language increases in direct proportion to Lear's diminished powers of rhetoric. Lear, resorting to 'curses' as his only means of expressing his fury, further emasculates himself in the wake of female challenges to his power. During the course of the opening scenes Lear's language alters dramatically; the quiet commands of the patriarch, assured of his position and power, are displaced by the outraged curses of a man who has wilfully brought into question his own identity and sense of place within both familial and patriarchal systems.

Regan, in contrast to her sister, merely glances at the coronet, her gaze being directed at Lear with far greater intensity. There is a coquettish edge to her delivery: it is energised and sensual, and her desire to please Lear connects with us as spectators as she too delivers her lines direct to camera in a tightly framed shot. The coronet is held within the frame at all times, serving not as a sign of the power she may appropriate for herself, but as a prop in her eloquent performance. Regan

is constructed as a woman who is aware of the power of her femininity and she uses this to commandeer Lear's attention and approbation in a way that Goneril seems incapable of. She says what Royal Lear, her father, wants to hear and the sexually charged nature of the delivery alerts us to the potentially incestuous undertones in her relationship with him – suspicions which are reinforced in Act Two, Scene Two when Lear threateningly flicks open the buttons on her bodice in a swift yet invasive act of male sexual aggression, engineered to intimidate. The sexually charged undertones are all the more successfully conveyed due to our positioning, her words seeming to be for us alone, despite the very public nature of the moment.



3.6 *King Lear* (1971)

Just as Goneril looks to Albany for affirmation of her success, Regan seeks out Cornwall. Both are aligned with the male power base, framed alongside their husbands, whilst Cordelia is framed in isolation. Even the way in which Brook edits from the couples to the isolated Cordelia is suggestive of fracture and difference. The jump cut places her out of sync with her sisters and she is

positioned in an almost painterly manner, sitting in the centre of the frame, the high walls towering above her, surrounded on all sides by empty space, no visual sign of male allegiances. She appears at this moment to be a diminutive figure and it is all the more surprising that it is Cordelia who then refuses to perform in the expected obedient and daughterly manner. However, an earlier momentary glance from Goneril to Cordelia, engineered to seek Cordelia's compliance, becomes redolent with meaning at this point; despite Cordelia's current isolation, we sense a shared experience, a shared knowledge amongst all three sisters in their dealings with their father, Goneril's desire to appease rather than stir his wrath forming the subtext here. The veracity of the declarations of love delivered by Goneril and Regan has not been countered by any loaded asides from Cordelia in this film; Brook has purposely omitted such asides, constructing a picture of sisters who have shared in some unnamed and unutterable abuse. We do not read events in the tradition of earlier theatrical productions in which Goneril and Regan are demonised from the outset, whilst Cordelia stands as the epitome of virtue wronged. When Cordelia steps up to receive the coronet she moves into the static frame from her seated position, her reluctance communicated through her body language, through the off-hand manner in which she takes it and through her averted gaze which she refuses to connect with either the coronet or Lear at first. She looks up only when commanded to do so, and the coronet weighs heavy in her hands, the top showing but momentarily before it moves out of shot completely, signalling her lack of concern for all that it stands for. Cordelia seems unwilling to enter into a game she senses is controlled by men and their patriarchal systems; unlike her sisters, she is not seduced by the promise of power and is wary of taking up Lear's gift of speech.



3.7 *King Lear* (1971)

At the moment of confrontation the shooting scripts indicate their mutual intransigence: “two refusals, two extremes,” Cordelia displaying a “Lear-like will,” Lear a “Cordelia-like refusal for compromise.”⁵⁰ Cordelia’s actions, unlike those of her sisters at this stage, are not filtered by her allegiance with men. When Lear commands her to “Speak,” the static camera holds a close up shot of Cordelia for four seconds, suggesting through the silence the strength of her resistance. The camera’s jump cuts, firstly to Kent and then to a viewing position behind Cordelia’s head, lend a nervous edge to the scene, and as Lear delivers the line “Nothing will come of nothing”(1.1:90) we see him in the background of the shot, a blurred yet powerful presence within the frame. At this point he is still able to intimidate through the strength of his rhetoric; his speech consists of commands. But despite his power to intimidate from the margins of the shot, Cordelia stands strong. She is its focus, even though facing away from the camera, and the spectator is aligned with her. Her delivery is not into camera and there is no sense of a performance here. Goneril and Regan, delivering to camera, use it as a performance space but Brook makes a clear distinction between their use of that

space and Cordelia's by placing the camera behind her, giving us a viewing position which is slightly removed and yet intimate. We are denied both Cordelia's and Lear's facial reactions and are left to assess the situation from a distance. There is a duel-like quality to the way the rest of the interchange is edited in a series of jump cuts between Cordelia and Lear as they deliver their lines. Cordelia becomes the focus of the camera's gaze as she says "So young, my lord," her eyes now connecting with us and with Lear ; we then edit rapidly to Lear as she concludes "and true," as if to emphasise the truth of her statement by the way the editing isolates the phrase in delivery. But as we cut back to Lear it is clear that he remains unmoved by the sincerity of her delivery, preferring the performative declarations of love offered by Goneril and Regan. The scene is shot in such a way as to underline the credibility of Cordelia's speech, especially when placed alongside the highly theatrical speech of her sisters, yet Lear is unable to see what we see.

Lear's ensuing verbal attack upon Cordelia is heard off-camera but we hold on a static close up of her, focusing upon the ferocity of his language. Critics may argue that by omitting her asides, Brook constructs a Cordelia who emerges as a petulant child unworthy of our sympathies, and whose banishment is deserved.⁵¹ However, such assumptions fail to take into account the ways in which Brook engineers audience empathy both for Cordelia and her sisters: his point is that, in the initial stages at least, all three of them are more 'sinned against than sinning'. In cinematic terms representations of the potentially incestuous relationship between Ophelia and her father are deemed permissible: Tony Richardson's construction of a sexualised Ophelia/Polonius relationship in his 1969 production of *Hamlet* is accepted as a valid interpretation of Shakespeare's

text. But such a reading of the relationship between King Lear and his daughters provokes cries of incredulity and since both Lear and Polonius are elderly fathers, the aversion cannot be solely due to age or paternity - perhaps it is Lear's position as patriarch, invested as he is with not only the well-being of his family but of society, that makes any suggestion of abuse of his daughters so abhorrent, confirming as it does the corruption at the core of such systems. Tellingly, Brook cuts from Cordelia to a menacing close up of Lear's angry face on his delivery of the phrase "disclaim all my paternal care,"(1.1:114) visually demonstrating his rage at a moment when he is speaking of the "paternal care" he ought to be exercising. Cordelia thrusts back the gift of discourse, symbolised by the coronet which remains the focal point of the frame, inferring that the giving of the gift is in itself a negation of paternal care.

Lear's inertia ceases at this moment as he emerges, bear-like from the depths of his throne. The camera pans his giant torso, his bear furs making him tower within the frame as he reasserts his dominance through a conventional act of male aggression, the first of many, culminating in his incitement of a riot at Goneril's castle. Brook cuts and rearranges the dialogue considerably here. Kent's line "Lear's mad" drops shockingly into the scene without forewarning and the chaos of this moment, in which Lear's power is challenged directly, is reflected in the initially chaotic camera movement. However, it is Cordelia's challenge to Lear's power that dominates the scene. As France steps up to claim Cordelia her gaze remains averted and she is framed in profile in the foreground of the shot, the focus blurred: she is the object of male discussion but she has no power to influence proceedings as is indicated by her lack of clarity within the frame. When Lear moves into the background of the shot, his focus clear, his voice

dominating, Cordelia remains in profile and out of focus; but as Lear delivers the lines “nor shall ever see/ That face of hers again,”(1.1:265-266) Cordelia slowly turns to confront him, seizing control of the moment by turning her gaze upon him and, providing a visual contradiction to his discourse, she forces him to turn away from the power of her gaze.



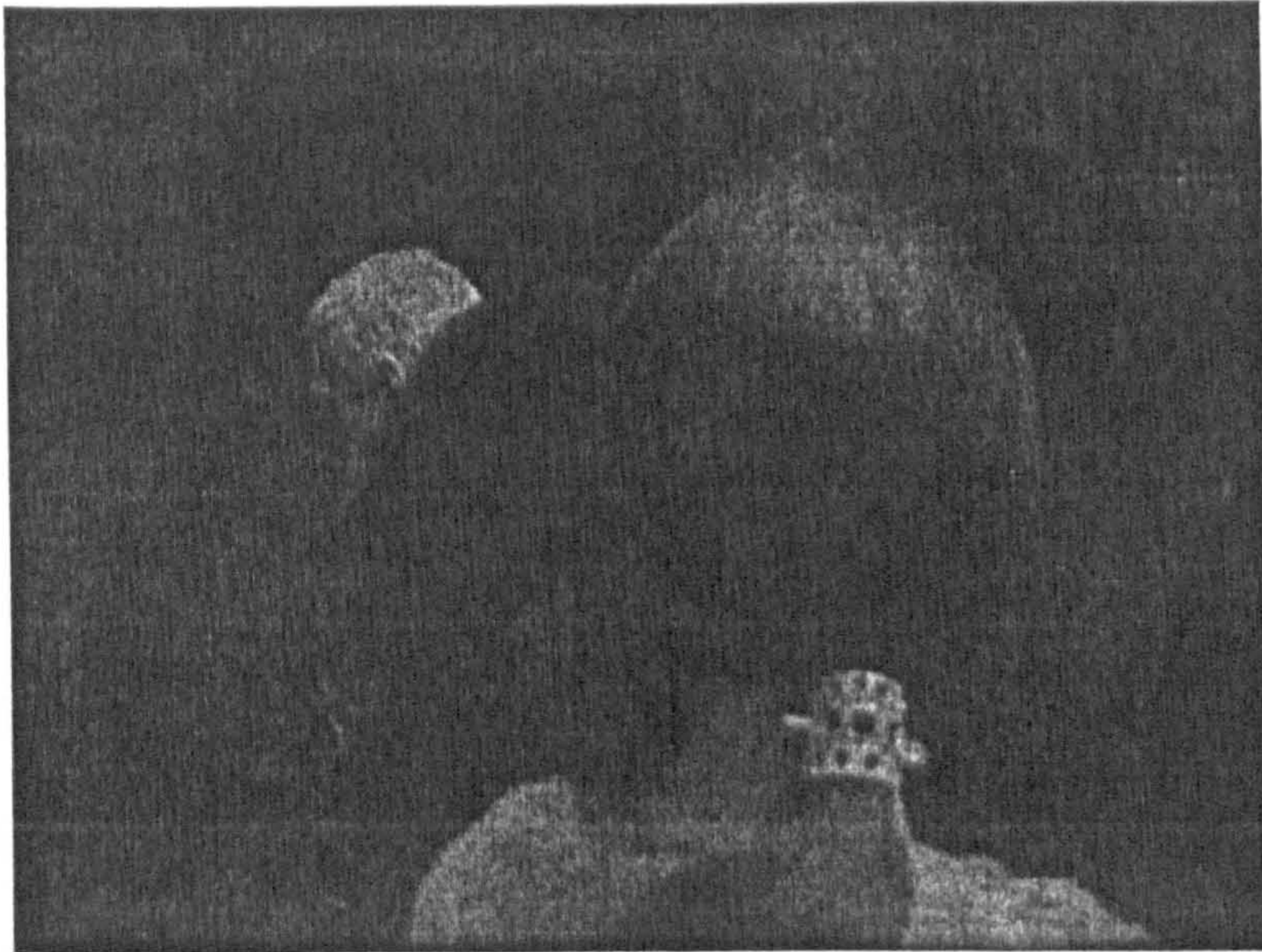
3.8 *King Lear* (1971)



3.9 *King Lear* (1971)

It is a direct challenge to Lear's power and it is asserted in silence, without recourse to the gift of speech he has tried to use to manipulate his daughters. Moreover, it is a turning point for female reappropriation of power, achieved

without male license, through the silences more readily associated with woman's conventional position.



3.10 *King Lear* (1971)

Its power to emasculate Lear is far more long-reaching than that afforded by the licensed speech of Goneril and Regan whose speech serves merely as a cipher for the power their husbands are afforded in the division of Lear's kingdom. Lear goes against cultural expectation when he condones female speech and in so doing he wilfully engineers his own downfall. At some unconscious level he desires death and annihilation, and it is this self-inflicted abdication not only of control but of language itself that propels him to the 'nothingness' that consumes him in the blank screen at the close of the film. When writing of the 'monstrous-feminine' of the Horror genre, Barbara Creed argues that "male castration fear is aligned with a masochistic desire for death".⁵² If we apply a similar logic to Lear's fear of being emasculated by his 'monstrous' daughters, his actions may be read as a masochistic wish-fulfilment of his desire for death: he instigates his own 'castration' and actively deconstructs his own identity. However, it is Cordelia's act of self-assertion at the close of the opening moments that signals the ultimate

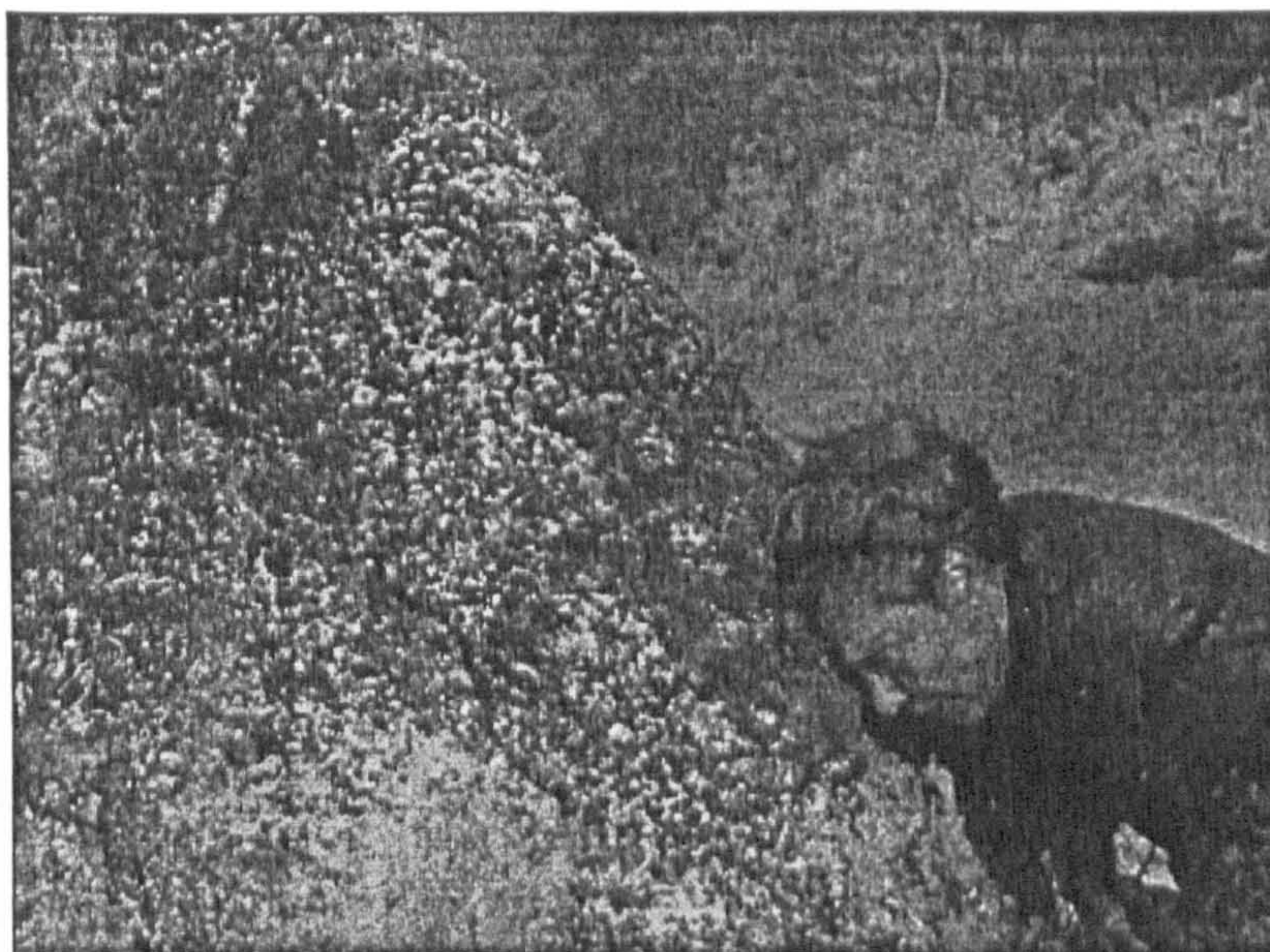
demise of patriarchal control and thus the death not only of Lear but of the patriarchal systems he perpetuates. Cordelia's Medusa-like gaze silences Lear and commands the screen space, ejecting him from the room.

As Lear exits we are reminded of the faces beyond the frame, watching and waiting upon Lear's every word, and it is to these faces that Lear now turns for reassurance of his power and identity. Yet the camera does not follow Lear's exit; instead it is Goneril and Regan who are given the final words in the Act's moment of closure as we cut to their departure. The last words are given to the private female voice which requires no license from Lear, and given the omission of all asides which suggest that Regan and Goneril will treat him badly, the concerns they voice seem well-founded and rational, especially when contrasted with the rash actions and ferocious language of their father. There is a distinct lack of male heroism in Brook's film: Lear's descent into insanity is presented not as a journey of self-realisation and redemption but as a self-destructive pursuit of the oblivion he attains in the final frame. And although Brook constructs a strong voice for Cordelia in Act One, and an increasingly assertive voice for her sisters as the narrative progresses, their final demise is no more heroic than that of Lear. Brook's depiction of Regan and Goneril rescues them from the demonisation their roles traditionally dictate in the theatre but their downfall is still conventionally framed by their sexual desire for men, even though Brook has chosen not to realise on screen the explicit sex scenes which appear in the shooting script. Scene 104 of the shooting script opens on the "curtain-less interior" of Goneril's coach as she delivers the line "O, the difference of man and man"(4.2:26) whilst having sex with Edmund. We also see Edmund copulating with Regan in Scene 129c, and in Scene 129e their coupling continues as he reads Goneril's letter to Regan, the

script stating that he does so as he is “stroking and humping her,” Regan “clutch[ing] him savagely”.⁵³ To portray them as such sexualised beings on screen would reinforce the very negative phallogentric belief that female sexuality is abject – an abjection Creed believes “helps to found the patriarchal symbolic order.”⁵⁴

But Brook ultimately chooses to omit these images, making Goneril’s only moment of intimacy with Edmund an almost chaste encounter, her lips barely touching him, her emotions conveyed only by the intensity of her gaze. Instead, he is at pains to construct images of femininity which, despite the historical baggage Goneril and Regan bring to their roles, defy their portrayal as being the sexually charged ‘monstrous’ offspring of Lear’s imaginings. Brook evokes our sympathies for Goneril through the way in which he frames her final act. We see her, circling round and round, her head swaying as she moves in and out of the edges of the static shot, fragmenting her image; we have witnessed her murder of Regan and we now witness her violent suicide as we fast-edit to a shot of Cordelia being hanged. The fragmented images are suggestive of her mental instability and speak of the abuse which has brought her to this juncture. Each female death is realised on screen, and each death is fused in the audience’s psyche by the way Brook edits them together, suggesting a common cause at the core of their demise. The deaths of the women dominate screen space and screen time, the battle between Edgar and Edmund being dealt with almost as an aside to the main action and Lear’s death being screened as a blank performance space. It is tempting to make the assumption that their deaths are realised on screen as testimony to the destructive nature of patriarchy. However, though their violent deaths do not function as foils to the deaths of heroic males neither do they afford

any heroic status to the female. There *is* a proactive element to Goneril's final suicidal act which cannot be denied; it lends her death a greater poignancy than that envisaged in the shooting script in which Goneril and Regan are described in 'monstrous' terms as a "two-headed spidery beast" that "rolls over the clifftop and crashes on the rocks below."⁵⁵ But Brook's nihilistic vision ensures that all deaths seem pointless, inconsequential, devoid of meaning.



3.11 *King Lear* (1971)



3.12 *King Lear* (1971)

In refusing to demonise Lear's daughters on screen Brook is, to a certain extent, conforming to the expectations of a mainstream Hollywood system which seems unable to cope with 'monstrous' images of femininity in any genre other than Horror or Film Noir, and in his conscious attempts to validate the experiences and reactions of these daughters he does, unwittingly, stereotype them as female victims. This refusal to engage with the problematic construction of demonised womanhood may be seen as a flaw in what is in all other respects an anti-Hollywood production, but Brook's construction of Lear's daughters is not conditioned by a desire to make them more palatable for a mainstream audience. Rather, his intent is to work against the accepted theatrical readings of Lear's 'demonised' daughters, offering us a different perspective which, whilst it may not challenge conventional cinematic representations of femininity, certainly contradicts traditional representations of the woman's position in this iconic text. As such, it is a reading that consistently contradicts mainstream expectations.

Ultimately, Brook's is a vision which has much more in common with Crisis Cinema than with conventional adaptations of Shakespeare on screen. His approach is that of the experimental film-maker rather than the theatrical practitioner and his choices are influenced by the conventions of film rather than stage. His work has more in common with French New Wave directors like Godard than actor-managers like Laurence Olivier. Brook adopts counter cinematic techniques and employs non-conventional editing and framing in order to realise on screen both the multiplicity of Shakespeare's versification and the sense of fragmentation and inertia central to his own image system. In so doing, he has created an art film which foregrounds the process of storytelling whilst retaining the narrative momentum more readily associated with classical forms.

Writing at the time of the film's release, critic Jonathan Raban claims that the film is "a riot of inexplicable artiness,"^{lvi} and it is, indeed, "a Hollywood showman's nightmare";^{lvii} however, Brook's "artiness" is far from artless and if the film is "a Hollywood showman's nightmare" one could argue that Brook has achieved his desired effect.

ⁱ Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (London, 1977), p.244.

ⁱⁱ Michael Billington, Reviews: Tierno Bokar, *The Guardian*, 24th June, 2005, p.26.

ⁱⁱⁱ Grigori Kozintsev, *The Space of Tragedy: The Diary of a Film Director* (London, 1977), p.22.

^{iv} Robert Murphy, *Sixties British Cinema* (London, 1992), p.4.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 71.

^{vi} Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London, 1997), p. 150-151.

^{vii} Murphy quoting Alan Lovell, *BFI Education Seminar Paper*, 1969.

^{viii} Street, p.170.

^{ix} Alexander Walker, *Hollywood, England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties* (London, 1974), p.452.

^x *Ibid.*, p.452.

^{xi} Mick Broderick, "Heroic Apocalypse: Mad Max, Mythology and the Millennium," *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Washington D.C., 1993), p. 254-255.

^{xii} James Combs, "Pox-Eclipse Now – The Dystopian Imagination", " *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Washington D.C., 1993), p. 23-24.

^{xiii} Christopher Sharrett, ed., *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film* (Washington D.C., 1993), p.5.

^{xiv} Geoffrey Reeves, "Finding Shakespeare on Film: an Interview with Peter Brook", first published in *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11, No.1, Fall, 1966, *Focus on Shakespeare Films*, ed. Charles W. Eckert (New Jersey, 1972).

^{xv} Roger Manville, *Shakespeare and the Film* (London, 1971)

^{xvi} Brook interview, Eckert, p.37.

^{xvii} Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (London, 1977), p.245.

^{xviii} Brook interview, Eckert, p.38.

^{xix} Roger Manvell quoting Michael Birkett, *Shakespeare and the Film* (London, 1971), p.140.

^{xx} Peter Brook, *Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (9/9/68) reproduced by Folger Library (Washington D.C.), Sc. 89.

^{xxi} Brook in Eckert, p.38.

^{xxii} Catherine Belsey, "A Question of Perspective", *Shakespeare on Film*, ed., Robert Shaughnessy (Basingstoke, 1998), p.68.

^{xxiii} Normand Berlin, "Peter Brook's Interpretation of King Lear: 'Nothing Will Come of Nothing'," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 15, 1977, p.300.

^{xxiv} Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (New York, 1974), p. 132.

^{xxv} Brook, *Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (9/9/68), Scene 140.

^{xxvi} Brook in Eckert, p.38.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p.41.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, p.38-41.

^{xxix} *Ibid.*, p.41.

^{xxx} *Ibid.*, p.40.

^{xxxi} Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: Peter Brook's King Lear and Akira Kurosawa's Throne of Blood* (Cambridge, 1988), p.145.

^{xxxii} Birkett quoted in Manvell, p.137.

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- ^{xxxiii} Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent D'Est", *Afterimage* (Visual Studies Workshop) Autumn, 1972
- ^{xxxiv} Peter Brook, *The Empty Stage* (London, 1972), p.80.
- ^{xxxv} Kozintsev, p. 241.
- ³⁶ Wollen, P.9.
- ^{xxxvi} *King Lear* (1971).
- ^{xxxvii} Russell Jackson, "From Play-script to Screenplay," *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, ed., Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000), p.25.
- ^{xxxix} Davies, p. 152.
- ^{xi} Brook, *Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (9/9/68).
- ^{xli} Peter Brook, *Second Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (5/12/68) reproduced by Folger Library (Washington D.C.)
- ^{xlii} Brook quoted by Manvell in *Sight and Sound* interview (1965), p.133.
- ^{xliii} Brook, *Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (9/9/68), Sc. 1.
- ^{xliv} *Ibid.*, Sc.1.
- ^{xliv} Brook, *Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (9/9/68), Sc. 13.
- ^{xlvi} Brook, *Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (9/9/68), Sc.5.
- ^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, Sc.5.
- ^{xlvi} *Ibid.*, Sc.5.
- ^{xlvi} Carol Rutter, "Eel Pie and Ugly Sisters", *Lear From Study to Stage: Essays in Criticism*, eds, James Ogden and Arthur H. Scouten (London, 1997), p. 176.
- ⁱ Brook, *Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (9/9/68), Sc. 6.
- ⁱⁱ Berlin, p.301
- ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London, 1993), p.155.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Brook, *Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (9/9/68), Sc. 104 & 129c.
- ^{iv} Creed, p.152.
- ^{iv} Brook, *Draft Shooting Script: King Lear* (9/9/68), Sc. 135.
- ^{vi} Jonathan Raban, Film Review of Brook's *King Lear*, *New Statesman*, 30th July, 1971. ^{vi} Jorgens, p.244
- ^{vi} Jorgens, p.244

3.3 Shakespeare as “Living Sculpture”:¹ Steve Rumbelow’s *King Lear* (1976)

Steve Rumbelow’s *King Lear* defies conventional genre definition leading to the film’s resultant lack of success in either a commercial or an artistic sense and its relative obscurity in a critical sense. With the exception of a brief reference from Neil Sinyard in his text *Filming Literature* Rumbelow’s film is given *no* critical consideration even by Shakespeare scholars, despite its British Film Council grant-assisted status; its inability to attract any kind of attention from the academic arena as well as the more commercially motivated world of cinema is symptomatic of its failure to make the successful transition from stage to screen. We are presented with an intellectually challenging deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the Lear narrative: Rumbelow purposely mirrors the *act* of reconstruction undertaken in relation to what we now view as Shakespeare’s version of *King Lear*, the Quarto and Folio editions of which are themselves ‘remembered’ reconstructions of an Ur-text, but he is unable to resituate elements of the Lear narrative successfully within the new medium of film. His treatment lacks cinematic coherence and plausibility.

Although an intriguing piece of *performative* innovation, Steve Rumbelow’s *King Lear* does not translate successfully to the screen and its indebtedness to its own theatrical origins and to its Shakespearean source text presents insurmountable obstacles to its relocation to the medium of film. Rumbelow continues to work within the temporal and spatial constraints of the stage rather than the screen, and his film cannot stand alone as a work of cinematic art since without reference to Shakespeare’s version there would be no comprehensible narrative, no definable character constructs, no *raison d’être* for its existence as a cinema text. Rumbelow deconstructs the Lear myth, editing and

rearranging the Shakespearean version to the point that it is barely recognisable, but his reconstruction of the narrative and the verse ensures a disconcerting level of co-dependency between his adaptation and Shakespeare's play. Unlike the creators of conservative Shakespearean screen adaptations, Rumbelow does not retain the source text's structure and his deployment of the de-contextualised Shakespearean language de-stabilizes our conventional understanding of the verse. Whilst de-stabilizing the nucleus of meaning within the source text is not in itself a negative, Rumbelow's inability to ensure narrative clarity is. Furthermore, what may be seen as intellectually stimulating in a theatrical context is not necessarily so within a cinematic context; it could be argued that there is a theatrical element to all three of the 'canonized' film versions of *King Lear*, but Rumbelow's theatrical preoccupations preclude the successful translation of his stage-centred script. Consequently, the film's commercial viability remains extremely limited.

Even if viewed as the kind of "sub-genre of 'literary adaptation' " cited by Anderegg, in which the source text is foregrounded to a marked extent and the language is of *central* importance,² the film cannot be deemed a success since it serves to undermine any kind of 'literary' stability the source text may bring with it. It is anti-genre in every respect as it defies both cinematic and theatrical genre identification: it is neither theatrical tragedy nor heritage cinema nor any of the more mainstream generic derivations. Consequently, it has no generic placement within the industry, even as an art house offering. Made on a shoe-string budget provided by a British Film Institute grant, it is as far from the realms of mainstream cinema as is cinematically possible, and there seems little justification for this translation of Rumbelow's Triple Action Theatre Group's staged version to the screen, especially given the release of Brook's similarly nihilistic,

experimental film interpretation of *King Lear* only six years previously.

Rumbelow's film fails to engage with either its screened Shakespeare.

predecessors or with what was happening within the commercial world of film in the mid seventies when most adaptations of Shakespeare's plays were produced for the increasingly popular small screen.

Following on from a decade of highly successful costume drama renditions of Shakespeare's plays from directors like Franco Zeffirelli, Stuart Burge, Rumbelow's experimental theatrical approach to screen adaptation of Shakespeare's work failed to find an audience. Directors like Polanski, in his 1971 version of *Macbeth*, managed to introduce new ways of working with the Shakespearean text, incorporating elements of horror into the more accepted period setting and monopolising upon the naturalistic properties of the medium; Rumbelow, unfortunately, seems oblivious to the viewing expectations of a cinema-going audience and his experimental treatment of the source text, rooted as it is in theatrical practice rather than cinematic practice, produces a film text which is left in a commercial no-man's land. The mid-sixties to the early seventies produced a range of extremely successful screen adaptations of Shakespeare's works, from popular high concept costume dramas like Zeffirelli's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1966) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), and Stuart Burge's *Julius Caesar* (1970), to the more introverted versions seeking the kind of literary acclaim attained by films like Kozintsev's and Tony Richardson's *Hamlet* (1964 and 1969); the 'marginal' Shakespearean adaptation was also successfully represented with Welles' *Chimes at Midnight* (1966) and Brook's apocalyptic, counter-cinematic *King Lear* demonstrating new ways to construct Shakespeare's texts for a cinema-going audience. After such an intense period of production,

Shakespearean screen adaptations seemed to disappear from the big screen, the plays finding a place instead in the increasingly popular TV and video market circuits by the mid seventies when Rumbelow's *King Lear* was released. Given its art house affiliations its capacity to thrive in either of the latter markets was always going to be questionable.

During the opening sequence, a title card signals the theatrical nature of Rumbelow's film: it is "from the Triple Action Theatre Group," and its theatrical origins are in evidence throughout the production. For Rumbelow, theatre is about "blend[ing] the rhythms of spoken text with physical movements" as a means to creating "living sculpture," and Shakespeare's texts provide him with "the widest scope for varied and rhythmic movement in space."³ Influenced by Artaud, gestures and movement become all -important in his staged Shakespeare but whilst such an emphasis on exaggerated physical expression may work within the realms of the theatre, Rumbelow's insistence upon transposing these theatrical techniques to the screen meets with cinematic resistance due to the naturalistic nature of the new medium. Whilst casting one actor as both Kent and the Fool - denoting a change of character *only* through gesture and voice intonation - is workable in a staged production the same is not necessarily true of cinema where the audience will be distanced from the physical immediacy of the performance. Confusion reigns as the only means to character differentiation becomes dialogue dependent and the viewer's detailed knowledge of 'who says what' in the source text is the only key to narrative comprehension. Such dependency upon prior knowledge of the source text may not be intended but to the *King Lear* 'virgin', Rumbelow's reliance upon performance distinctions renders his film incoherent. Similarly, his use of exaggerated delivery, although motivated by a desire to

underscore the absurdist elements of the source text rather than its theatricality, fails to connect with a cinema audience accustomed to a more naturalistic delivery mode. Delivery here is to 'front of house', the actors rarely projecting to each other, and there are few reaction shots. The Fool's lines are spoken in a ridiculous RP voice and Gloucester's lines are so tortuously distorted that to gain any understanding of his utterances one must again try to latch on to key words from his speeches in the source text for they make no sense in isolation.

Whilst many directors revel in the fact that the camera allows for intimate, naturalistic treatment of Shakespeare's verse, Rumbelow foregoes one of the strengths of the cinematic medium in favour of a much more stylised approach. Unlike Brook, he does not make the transition from stage practitioner to film practitioner. Brook *engages* with film language: the counter-cinematic techniques he employs to produce a film text which consciously operates outside the mainstream also demonstrate his inherent understanding of the very different signifying system within which he is working. His cinematic experimentations become an intrinsic part of his apocalyptic reading of the text and a sense of fragmentation is communicated through Brook's cinematography, framing and editing. Rumbelow, on the other hand, fails to exploit cinematic signifiers with any degree of success. Sound remains diegetic and of the kind utilised in a theatrical setting with music coming from an enigmatic pipe playing 'Pied Piper' figure (whom we eventually identify as Edgar) and his folkloric song about the rain. There is scant attention paid to the significance of editing and only rare moments in which the camera is used creatively to enhance the sense of chaotic confusion within a sequence. In Rumbelow's defence, Neil Sinyard argues that it is more "critical essay...written with the camera" than film text due to its

selective inclusions and exclusions.⁴ But the screen adapter/ director has a creative duty to work to *some* extent with the filmic devices of the new medium and to ensure a certain degree of narrative cohesion alongside the chosen interpretive mode. This narrative cohesion should not necessarily fall in with prior knowledge of a given source text or be dependent upon it, yet it ought to at least achieve narrative cohesion in relation to its *own* story.

With a running time of only forty-five minutes, Rumbelow's severely edited text becomes incomprehensible for any viewer other than the most well-schooled Shakespearean and even though Shakespeare's verse provides the film's dialogue, the words lack context due to an absence of narrative cohesion. Rumbelow radically deconstructs the classic narrative design of the source text, reshaping it into an 'anti-structure'⁵ characterised by narrative gaps, non-linear time shifts, inconsistent realities and unexplained coincidences. Although the subplot remains in part, Edmund is edited from the script and his key speech in which he names nature his "goddess" is delivered by Goneril, aligning her with masculine power from the outset. There is little heed to narrative chronology or character development, and nothing humanizing about the act of narration. It defies cinematic genre definition, and operates beyond the conventions of theatrical tragedy. Instead, Rumbelow emphasises abstract elements, sculpting the language of Shakespeare's play into a kind of visual physicality. We jump, for example, from a sequence which shows Lear and the Fool/ Kent performing acrobatic tumbles to a shot of Kent/Lear suspended in a makeshift stock: we have no back story to place this frame into any kind of narrative context and we have no emotional investment in the fate of Rumbelow's characters. Similarly, selective elements of the subplot are retained; Edgar becomes the enigmatic repository of

wisdom and his reunion with his father is given considerable screen time where many adapters have seen fit to edit such moments, but said reunion makes little sense for those unfamiliar with the source text since there has been no explication of the earlier rift in their relationship. Without such back story and without Edmund the relationship between Edgar and his father lacks credibility and purpose.

Rumbelow's theatrical reliance upon "dense metaphors rather than plot"⁶ is translated onto screen and he exploits the language of the source text through the visual realisation of on-screen images. Shakespearean references to fire become concrete and consistent on-screen motifs, providing the set's only light via bonfires, torches and candles, and at a visual level they reiterate Lear's belief that he is "bound/ Upon a wheel of fire,"(4.7:46-47) underscoring this interpretation's purgatorial reading of the text as it attempts to visually realise the imagery contained in Shakespeare's verse. However, rather than investing his script with an image system which permeates the film text at a subliminal level, Rumbelow's heavy-handed approach serves to illustrate Sinyard's point that there may be "a kind of literalness, a photographic realism about the screen image which is fundamentally opposed to the symbolic, metaphoric, ritualistic elements in Shakespeare."⁷ Certainly, Rumbelow's *literal* realisation of Shakespeare's *metaphorical* exploration of the notion of seeing and not seeing demonstrates how ill-suited the medium of film is to the concrete transposition of Shakespearean imagery. When Gloucester first appears his eyes are already bound, his movements awkward, and it is not until he is attacked by Regan that his blindfold falls and he is able to see clearly. Such a narrative reversal, confusing enough in itself, offers a clumsy, heavy-handed physical representation of what in the source

text is a subtle and slowly developed metaphorical motif. Rumbelow's problem is two-fold: he tries to recreate on screen the kind of abstract, non-localized performance space of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage but he also reconstructs Shakespeare's verse via a system of concretely realised images which are at odds with the symbolic subtleties of that verse. In one sense he relies upon his audience's intelligence: they are credited with a level of textual literacy. But he also assumes a lack of film literacy and visual sophistication on the part of his audience for whom he painstakingly recreates the images conjured by Shakespeare's language.

The film set's *mise en scène* is strikingly minimalistic and any visual potency is achieved via the very literal translation of the more metaphorical elements embedded in the source text. From the outset, we are plunged into a cavernous and chaotic world in which life becomes a purgatorial existence and humankind is seen as inherently base. As with Brook's production, familial and political elements are no longer of central concern. It is a primordial nameless no-man's land consisting of long dark corridors which resemble pit shafts and contrastingly open yet similarly intimidating spaces dimly lit by burning fires and torches. It is both geographically and temporally non-specific. Within the opening moments of the film comes the sound of a human howl beyond the frame, pre-empting Lear's "Howl, howl, howl, howl!" (5.3:225) heard at a much later point in the narrative of Shakespeare's play when he learns of Cordelia's death. A sequence of chaotic shots brings us to a prostrate and as yet unidentified male figure, giving birth to two fully grown daughters who emerge from his 'reproductive organs', rising to tower above him and confining him within the frame. At this very early stage within the narrative the lines "We came crying

hither” and “When we are born we cry that we are come/ To this great stage of fools”(4.6:174-179) are visually and physically *enacted* through the birthing sequence rather than *spoken*, as are many of the key verses from Shakespeare’s text. The sequence suggests from the outset - via this literal birthing process - that Lear is responsible for his own demise and that of patriarchy, since it is Lear who gives life to the ‘monstrous’ women who seek his destruction. Notions of redemption or of innocence are instantly quashed. There is no virtuous Cordelia, Regan and Goneril are *born* in collusion and Lear’s demise is presented as a foregone conclusion, especially when Lear’s division of his lands is presented not as a wilful and misguided act on his part but as a proactive takeover bid by his daughters. It is Regan who delivers Lear’s “darker purpose” and who orders him to “shake all cares and business from [his] age”(1.1:35-40).

Distortions of narrative construct are not necessarily negative - many art house writer/directors take the enigmatic path and a cryptic approach can work within the more abstract confines of the theatre – but Rumbelow’s editing and rearrangement is such that what is left remains reliant upon prior knowledge of Shakespeare’s stage version for its narrative cogency and it can never rise above its status as a dependent off-shoot of its Shakespearean source. Rumbelow’s version is less “quantum leap,”⁸ more Dada-esque reinvention. But what is most disconcerting is the film’s lack of cinematic signification in all but the crudest visual sense. It emerges as a cross between art house cinema and filmed theatre and as such it has no real place in a film industry context.

¹ Ruby Cohn, “The Triple Action Theatre Group,” *Theatre Journal*, 27:1, March, 1975, p.56-57.

² Michael Anderegg, *Cinematic Shakespeare* (London: 2004) pp.2-3

³ Cohn, pp.56-57.

⁴ Neil Sinyard, *Filming Literature: the Art of Screen Adaptation* (London, 1986), p.23

⁵ McKee, *Story*, p.45.

⁶ Cohn, p.56.

⁷ Sinyard, p.2.

⁸ Charles Marowitz, *Recycling Shakespeare* (London, 1991)p.15.

3.4 “Meantime we shall express our darker purpose”: Jean-Luc Godard’s *King Lear* (1987)

Jean-Luc Godard presents us with a movie that exhibits a lack of narrative cohesion and a seeming irreverence not only for genre and industry expectations but for its Shakespearean source text. His ‘darker purpose’ has less to do with ‘Shakespeare’ than with his intent to present an intellectual puzzle which parodies the commercial film industry and interrogates all facets of patriarchal power.

He employs alienation techniques engineered to distance the audience and to ensure its active engagement with the ideas explored within his film text rather than with characters or any form of narrative momentum, presenting us instead with firstly a meditation upon patriarchal power in its many guises, and secondly philosophical musings on the relationship between words and visual images. He is, according to Susan Bennett, more interested in “the business of *how* a text, especially one as culturally protected as *King Lear*, can be made to *mean* - for whom and to what ends and, most of all, at what cost,” rather than in “the business of interpreting text.”¹ Like Brook and Rumbelow before him, Godard chooses to retain the title of the source text as a cultural referent, bringing with it all of its associated ideologies and high art affiliations. However, whilst Rumbelow’s film is trapped in a co-dependent relationship with both the Shakespearean play script and The Triple Action Theatre Group’s former stage production, Godard’s text - as with Brook’s film text - exists beyond the confines of the supposed source text and operates firmly within the realms of cinema, creating what Bennett terms a “proactive relation to the Ur- texts of culture.”² He seeks to deconstruct the Lear myth in much the same way as he deconstructs the Carmen myth in his *Prenom: Carmen* (1983), dislocating our preconceived notions of each and forcing us to a

realisation that there is no fixed locus of meaning in any given text, regardless of its seemingly untouchable cultural status. But whilst an audience's detailed prior knowledge of Shakespeare's play is not a prerequisite for meaningful engagement with Godard's film, familiarity with the play's preoccupations aids understanding. It is part of his signature style to introduce layers of intertextual referencing within his films and in his *King Lear* (1987), Shakespeare's play script is supplemented by the inclusion of a vast range of works of art, from the paintings of Velazquez, Botticelli, Renoir and Goya, to photographs of various 'fathers' of the world of cinema, to visual and verbal allusions to Shakespeare's Sonnets 47 and 60, Robert Bresson's *Joan of Arc* and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.

From a genre perspective, Godard's *King Lear* purports to be both gangster and sci-fi, yet in reality it refuses to conform to the generic conventions and expectations of either on all but the most rudimentary level. Despite Godard's longstanding interest in the Hollywood gangster, first explored in *A Bout de Souffle* (1960), the gangster connections in his *King Lear* are extremely limited. Mailer claims that "the Mafia is the only way to do Lear" during the opening moments of the film, and the renaming of Lear and his entourage as Don Learo, Don Gloucester, Don Kenny and so on pays lip service to the gangster genre as do scenes in which both Kate Mailer (prior to the famous departure of Mailer and his daughter from the film set) and Molly Ringwald (in role as the film's Cordelia) question their 'fathers' about the Mafia connection. At one point Cordelia types the dictated words of her father, retired Mafia boss Don Learo, as he constructs his book about American gangsters; she becomes distressed as he revels in talk of Mafia violence, but the plot lines and iconographic expectations of the gangster genre are not realised in this film.

There are mere 'nods' to the genre with a number of scenes played out around the restaurant table set for many guests but at which only Don Learo and Cordelia sit; such scenes echo at an iconographic level the stock moments in the gangster film in which 'business' is conducted over food either in the public domain of the restaurant or within the more private yet just as populated confines of 'the family' dining room, but in Godard's film the presence of just Cordelia and her father undermines the convention. And though Don Learo employs a suitably gangsteresque inflection in his delivery, he does not emerge as the gangster genre's male hero whose quest shapes the narrative and the absence of any 'mob' associates further undermines his credibility as retired mobster. If any 'quest' emerges at all it is that of William Shakespeare Junior who seeks to reconstruct his ancestor's lost texts: Don Learo serves only as an example of the gangster genre's association with failed patriarchal power. Similarly, though supposedly set in a post-apocalyptic world and billed as a science fiction film, there are *no* visible signs of post-Chernobyl destruction and any references to this being a futuristic scenario come via exceedingly dry moments of exposition in which Shakespeare Junior *tells* us of the present situation and of the destruction of works of art resulting from the disaster with lines such as "Chernobyl, and everything disappears." Images of a Chernobyl-fuelled apocalypse do not materialise, despite Godard's later musings on the power of the visual image.

Perhaps it is unrealistic to anticipate a genre-based approach to an adaptation of *King Lear* by such a radically *avant garde* director but one wonders what exactly Godard's financial backers at Cannon Films did expect of their latest directorial acquisition. The famous 1985 Cannes Film Festival contract-on-a-napkin deal between Godard, Norman Mailer and Cannon's Menahem Golan

seems, even without hindsight, to be a doomed collaboration given the former 'pedigree' of Cannon Films. Renowned as producers of genre cinema with a focus on action and comedy, at the same time as they acquired the services of Godard, they were involved in the making of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre II* (1986), *Superman IV: Quest for Peace* (1987) and *The Barbarians* (1987), and their filmography includes such genre offerings as *Happy Hooker* (1975), *Happy Hooker Goes to Hollywood* (1977) and *Happy Hooker Goes Hollywood* (1980). The mainstream commercial credentials of the Cannon group seem to be at odds not only with the counter-cinematic leanings of a director like Godard but with involvement in a project which adapts a work associated with 'high art'. Presumably Cannon wanted to access a different kind of spectatorship and to cash in on the cultural kudos afforded by both director and Shakespearean source text, though Godard's motivation for a Hollywood debut lacks *any* clear justification. His relentless mockery of his backers becomes an intrinsic part of his film text, his anti-Hollywood stance being played out as an elaborate revenge on financiers who dared to intervene, dared to expect delivery of a finished product, dared to anticipate financial reward. Kenneth Rothwell argues that Godard "play[s] Cordelia to Cannon Film's *King Lear*,"³ suggesting that the director is the innocent victim here and the film company the unreasonable, domineering patriarch, but such an evaluation tends to romanticise the issue. The film industry is profit-seeking and commercially driven, as was the theatre 'industry' in the time of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Writing back in the 1930s Allardyce Nicoll points out that work created by Shakespeare and his contemporaries "once paid for by the management, ceased to be their property, might be used in any way the management saw fit and was not likely to view the light of day in printed

form”;⁴ money-making was one of the main motivations and the Elizabethan/Jacobean management equivalent of Cannon was just as preoccupied with box office receipts as today’s commercial film-financiers: “considerations of art” were deemed best “left to the universities”⁵ in Shakespeare’s day.

To assume that the movie industry is other than a profit-generating organisation is to be naïve but regardless of this Godard expresses his feelings of betrayal within the film, beginning the narrative with a detailed elaboration of the initial rift between himself and the Cannon/ Mailer partnership. Godard foregrounds production issues from the outset: the first reference to Cannon comes in the form of a taped telephone conversation, played in voice-over, between Godard and a Cannon executive who is pressing the director for a finished product. Voice-over and accompanying on-screen images are totally unconnected, presenting a disjointed and fragmented relationship that, although of little apparent relevance to narrative momentum, reflects the lack of harmony between filmmaker and film financier. The garbled nature of the voice-over contrasts with the unhurried, lingering shots of the art work passing before the eye of the camera. Mailer is also under attack from the outset: Godard retains scenes shot for the original film version, written by and starring Mailer prior to his dramatic withdrawal from the project, overlaying the image with a directorial voice-over which labels Mailer “The Great Writer” who engages in “a Ceremony of Star Behaviour,” again highlighting Godard’s distaste of all things Hollywood and his concern with matters other than traditional storytelling.

Godard returns to this preoccupation with Hollywood throughout the film, demonising the commercial film industry via his commentary on the financial, power-hungry corporations represented here by his financial backers, Cannon

Films. In role as the bizarre Professor Pluggy, Godard argues that “when we lose money we lose nothing” but “when we lose character we lose everything,” implying that to ‘sell out’ to the corporations is to prostitute oneself to the commercial film industry. It seems that Godard’s main aim in this film is to exact an artistic revenge on his backers by presenting them with an incoherent, unmarketable product – a product in which he indulges *himself* in his philosophical reflections about the state of the film industry and the near impossibility of making films, foregoing the art of story telling in favour of theoretical ruminations of little interest to his backers or his audience. Shakespeare Junior’s quest to recapture the lost works of his ancestor is financed by Cannon as a corporate investment, demonstrating once more the ways in which, according to Godard, ‘art’ - his own included - can be hijacked by the corporation. At one point in the film, France and Burgundy are replaced by corporate film financiers DWA and Fox as barterers for Cordelia’s ‘love’; Shakespeare’s verse merges with Godard’s commentary about Cannon as Don Learo asks Cordelia, “My joy, to whose young loves DWA and Twentieth Century Fox shine to be of interest, what can you say?” Pluggy consistently refers to a Mr Alien who we surmise is representative of the Cannon Group (realised on-screen by Woody Allen seen briefly in the closing frames editing the film) and who at the end of the film is in charge. In voice-over, Shakespeare Junior tells us that:

The bad times of Chernobyl had been long forgotten.

Paramount, Fox, Warners were booming. I was

finishing the picture, or bringing this twisted fairy tale

to an end. The man in charge was named Mr Alien. This

can be no accident.

The closing remark is intentionally cryptic, leaving us to ponder what Godard may mean, but there remains a disconcerting edge of Godardian paranoia embedded in his parodic treatment of the commercial film industry. His decision to 'trash the citadels of narrative cinema' in order to make his point seems somewhat foolhardy and self-indulgent.

Just as Rumbelow's *King Lear* is more "critical essay written with a camera"⁶ than effective narrative cinema, Godard's *King Lear* is, according to David Impastato, first and foremost "a film of ideas, of criticism," and one which "ignor[es] the implications of the market place."⁷ As *avant garde* films which adopt an anti-genre stance they cannot, however, escape some form of generic classification, whether as the conventionally unconventional art house film⁸ or as part of an emerging genre of 'filmed essays' with their own set of conventions and fragmented narrative patterns. Whatever the motivations are behind this film - and narrative clarity is not one of them - Godard's appropriation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is at best selective, but there are numerous tentative links forged between play script and screenplay despite his irreverent treatment of the text. Jessica Maerz' contention that it is a film which is more concerned with its own history and conditions of production than with the play text seems well-founded given Godard's constant foregrounding of issues related to the relationship between himself and Cannon;⁹ however, his 'meditations' also interrogate the relationship between image and sound, verbal and linguistic signifiers as effective means of communication in the world of the cinema, and there are clearly moments when screenplay and playscript connect. In voice-over, Godard claims "Words are reckless... Words are one thing and reality is another thing... There is 'no thing'," suggesting, as does the Shakespearean source text in its emphasis

upon the word 'Nothing', that language is an unreliable, unstable signifier.

Furthermore, in role as Professor Pluggy, he asks Shakespeare Junior, "What are you writing for?" claiming that "When nobody writes the writing still exists," and thus posing further questions about the nature and significance of the Ur-texts of our culture. Junior's response compounds the issue: for him the problem is obvious - "No names, no lines, no story."



3.13 *King Lear* (1987)

In this context, Godard's refusal to engage in coherent narrative forms and clearly delineated characters has a philosophical justification, though as an audience we surely tend to agree with Shakespeare Junior who decries the lack of plot lines and character motivations, both of which are successfully explicated by the words of the source text Godard's Junior seeks to rediscover. Instead, it is the image which is, according to Professor Pluggy, "a pure creation of the soul.. a reconciliation of two realities," capable of an emotive power in direct proportion to its capacity to distance itself from the audience. However, his ruminations overlay a set of images of plastic dinosaur models glaringly lit by a naked light bulb: said images lack context, have no connection to any narrative thread within the film text, and fail to evoke an emotional response from his viewers. Perhaps

the anticipated emotion is one of audience frustration, again in line with Godard's overall parodic intent; the debate about the role of images continues in a scene involving an interview with a New York journalist who listens intently to Pluggy's incoherent ramblings, suggesting that Godard is mocking the whole media coverage of cinematic issues.

Images of artists and their fathers, and of 'fathers' of the cinema like Orson Welles, are projected in a sequence of black and white stills which seem totally unrelated to the two overlapping voice-overs, one of which continues the debate about the significance of the image, though the exact nature of either discourse is lost amidst a cacophony of surrounding sounds, from the background noises of the restaurant to the winds roaring around the sea shore. This distancing of the audience as a means to ensuring their intellectual engagement is part of Godard's counter-cinematic style, but whereas in his earlier films there is at least a narrative established before it is interrupted by such techniques, in Godard's *King Lear* narrative intransitivity is a constant: the "emotional spell of narrative"¹⁰ is not broken or interrupted because it is never established. However, there are moments in this sequence which successfully remind us of the *thematic* connections between Godard's images and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Peter Donaldson's in-depth study of the patriarchal relationships explored in Godard's film details the many ways in which it "appropriates the riches of [Shakespeare's] paternal text"; Godard presents us with what Donaldson terms "a distanced and debased model" of the Shakespearean text but one which "sometimes establishes sudden intimate connection to its parent while dissembling its filial relationship."¹¹ The connections of father to child, artist to disciples, artist to his own creations, film-financier to film-maker, source text to adaptation are all explored by Godard

during the course of the film, creating “a metaphoric, free-associative play on the theme of fatherhood”¹² which is much more reflective of the concerns anchored in Shakespeare’s play than are meditations upon the power of the image itself.

Godard points out at the start of the film that “It was not Lear with three daughters. It was Kate with three fathers: Mailer the star, Mailer as father and me as director - too much indeed.” His observations bring to the fore the issues shared by both play script and screenplay: patriarchal control, its ultimate demise and its systematic abuse of women are at the core of each, though whilst the issues are *enacted* via a classic story design and subtle character development in Shakespeare’s play, they are *interrogated* by the interplay of image, sound and language in Godard’s film, narrative momentum and clearly delineated characterisations being almost non-existent. Images of artistic fathers are replaced by images of evil fathers such as Goya’s ‘Chronos Devouring his Child’. Mailer’s ‘star behaviour’ and swift departure presents us with a Lear-like display of petulance and power, whilst Don Learo’s overly protective relationship with Cordelia smacks of the incestuous undertones subliminally located in Shakespeare’s play. His response to the attentions of Shakespeare Junior - “Are you trying to make a play for my girl? Get your hands off her” - and the bloodied sheets found in the hotel room he appears to share with Cordelia compound our suspicions. Cordelia’s role remains that of carer; Ringwald is constructed as artistic prop, seen typing the words of her father and ministering to his needs yet retaining an emotional distance.

Donaldson notes that Godard works to expose male exploitation of women by demonstrating how very dependent male culture is upon female subordination.¹³ And it is inferred in the film text that Godard’s Don Learo shoots

Cordelia, displaying the ultimate control over the female body. But Shakespeare's paternalistic text is superseded at the film's close by Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* which, unlike Shakespeare's play, survives intact. Despite the supposed destruction of all works of art, this female text prevails and attempts to silence the female 'voice' fail as we cut from a shot of Don Learo sitting in front of the dead Cordelia to a shot of a young woman reading from a printed copy of *The Waves*. Godard also shares some of the paternalistic lines from the Shakespearean text with a female voice over, challenging and renegotiating the power-play. Maerz may claim rather simplistically that Godard's film works via two distinct binary oppositions of power and virtue, Don Learo being representative of the former and Cordelia of the latter,¹⁴ but despite her physical death, and with it the death of virtue, at the end of the film the power rests with Cordelia at a more metaphysical level. In addition to this, Godard aligns his 'virtuous' Cordelia with the powerful figure of Joan of Arc; as we see Cordelia, dressed in virginal white and leading a white horse across an open field, a female voice-over recites lines from Bresson's *Joan of Arc* - "It is death against whom I ride....Against you I fling myself unvanquished and unyielding, O death!" - suggesting again that even in death power is vested in her rather than the patriarchal Lear.

And yet, it remains a frustrating film to engage with due to Godard's decision to work with the text in such an abstract manner. Kenneth Rothwell may revel in it as a "segmented and disjointed celebration of apocalypse," lauding it as a veritable "academic feast,"¹⁵ but at the level of narrative the film is a distinct failure. Godard 'trashes the cozy citadels of narrative cinema,' challenging what we have come to define as 'cinema' (within the independent or the mainstream

sector) but what he offers in place of narrative cohesion is a muddled meditation on the art of constructing meaning, whether from an Ur-text or from the recesses of his own mind. The mainstay of the only clearly identifiable story line involves Shakespeare Junior's search for and reinvention of his ancestor's lost plays, pitted against a backdrop of a search for all lost art in this post-Chernobyl, post-apocalyptic setting. Shakespeare's classic story design is deconstructed before the eye of the camera and is replaced by the same kind of inconsistent, non-linear anti-structure which shapes Rumbelow's appropriation of the Lear myth. Lines are delivered randomly, repeated erratically and spoken by an array of disembodied off-screen voice-overs as well as by Godard's on-screen realisations of Don Learo and Cordelia. The first lines from the play are spoken by a male voice-over and come from the latter part of the story when Lear asks "Am I in France?". The reply, "In your own kingdom, Sir" is barely audible since it is rendered redundant by the overwhelming sounds of waves and gulls. Later, given the identity and the quest of the young man seen gazing out to sea as these lines are spoken, we are able to make sense of the randomness of their delivery but they fail to provide a *clear* way into the narrative, especially for viewers who are not familiar with Shakespeare's text. The next collection of discernible lines from the play is repeated several times: we pan totally unconnected stills of art works and photographic portraits as the lines "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" (1.1:122) are delivered once more in a disembodied voice-over, displacing accepted cinematic structures of both visual and aural montage. There appears to be no rationale behind this repetition of the Shakespearean lines. Even when delivered on-screen by Cordelia and Don Learo, Shakespeare's lines fail to connect because they lack a context within this post-Chernobyl world. The

archaic phrasing ensures that they *sound* misplaced, and at the level of narrative cause and effect they invariably *are* misplaced.

Maerz argues that Godard is more preoccupied with “enact[ing] deconstruction”¹⁶ than with wholesale appropriation of Shakespeare’s text; its main function, she claims, is to illustrate “absence”- of Godard’s backers, of Mailer, of art works, of “conventional Shakespearean representation” - which in itself forms the “primary organizing principle” of the film.¹⁷ Perhaps the lack of narrative cogency and of expected patterns of film grammar should also be read as a purposeful ‘absence’. These ‘absences’ which Maerz sees as being of primary concern to Godard are, however, systematically challenged by Godard’s Shakespeare Junior who is constantly at pains to create meaning and to articulate the absences. We also focus upon the act of textual creation in two other instances: in the opening frames we see Mailer in the act of construction, typing his screenplay and chuckling to himself as he says “Oh yes, good way to begin,” and this act of narrative construction is repeated as Burgess Meredith’s Don Learo dictates his text to Cordelia. Throughout the film Junior searches for lost narratives, lost lines, lost characters, lost titles, at one point voicing his frustrations when unable to recall the title of Shakespeare’s *As you Like It*. In addition to his arguments with Professor Pluggy about the importance of names, lines and stories, he claims in the later stages of the film, to have reclaimed the lines and the plot but acknowledges his incapacity to control the characters thereby created:

I’ve reinvented the lines. I’ve reinvented the plot.

Now it’s up to the characters. Which is Dr Jeckyll

and which is Mr Hyde? All I know is I can’t

control either of them.

Junior's ruminations suggest that the characters have an independent existence beyond that encompassed by any kind of written representation, and again asks us to take up a more proactive position in relation to the Ur texts of Western culture. Godard's film presents us with a Cordelia and a Lear whose story leads Shakespeare Junior to the lost Lear narrative - "Something was going on between this old man and this girl. I decided to concentrate on their story" - but their position as 'reinvented' constructs from an earlier text does not *impose* a narrative upon them. Junior is one step behind them, constantly seen recording their words in his notebook and playing their 'lines' to himself over and over. In one of the closing scenes, Junior and Don Learo share an intimate moment in which they work through the lost lines of the play, Junior's notebook being passed between them as a prompt whilst they actively construct the missing pieces of the text. Junior serves as the kind of pseudo "prompter-conductor" identified by Tiffany Stern¹⁸ as a crucial component of the Elizabethan theatre, coaxing lines from actors, and in this filmic instance from the collective pre-Chernobyl memory. Again parallels may be drawn between the practice of 'remembering' and recording the texts of Shakespeare's plays in their Quarto and Folio formats and Junior's act of remembering and recording the remnants thereof in a post - Chernobyl world.

Furthermore, during a particularly bizarre woodland scene, we see a random collection of Pluggy's disciples following behind Shakespeare Junior, mimicking his every movement in what may be seen as a visual re-enactment of the adaptation process itself: the moves/ words/ thought processes of another are being re-formed and reshaped before the camera, the results of which may lead to the creation of a 'Jeckyll' or a 'Hyde' with an independent will. Impastato argues

that Godard is constantly questioning the role of the author in this film, taking a Derridean position in relation to all things outside the film text itself. He claims that the apparent murder of Professor Pluggy and of Shakespeare Junior “can be viewed in the light of Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’, ” the author being “merely a subject position in an infinite web of discourses,” with Godard himself as self-sacrificing author who “honours the multivalence and ambiguity of artistic creation.”¹⁹ Godard openly admits his films are also criticism,²⁰ and in his *King Lear* he demonstrates how problematic the notion of authorial integrity and intent can be, inferring that there can be no stable nucleus of meaning even within a text of established cultural status. He employs cinematic alienation in an effort to ensure audience engagement with his meditations at an intellectual rather than an emotional level, interjecting images with a vast array of inter titles and purposefully disjointed screen/ sound pairings which produce a film text that possesses neither narrative momentum nor credible character constructs. As such, it remains an extremely frustrating viewing experience despite its intellectual posturing and Godard’s anti-genre stance serves to alienate his audience.

Perhaps, even though billed as science fiction and invested with Mafia associations, it is foolish to anticipate a Godard film which remotely resembles a genre piece given his cinematic pedigree. But what is most disconcerting about Godard’s *King Lear* is the fact that from a cinematic viewpoint it does nothing new: Godard employs the same counter-cinematic techniques first seen as innovative back in the early seventies when films like *Vent d’Est* (1970) forced a complacent industry to take heed of new ways of creating and narrating on screen. Indeed, Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran*, released two years prior to Godard’s *King Lear* and revelling in its association with genre cinema, is a far more innovative work of

cinematic art than Godard's *avant garde* text could ever be. The eighties is a relatively barren period for the production of Shakespearean screen adaptation, and with the exception of Branagh's *Henry V*, made at the very end of the decade, the few on-screen realisations we are given take the form of intertextualised cinematic off-shoots like *The Dresser* (1983) which plays with the theatricality of *King Lear*, or those of Godard whose links to Shakespeare's play are tenuous, and Kurosawa whose genre twist melds East and West through the synthesising of the Japanese Jidai-geki genre and the western. Woody Allen's 1982 *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* is an off-the-wall rendition paying little more than homage to the title of Shakespeare's play, whilst Martha Coolidge's *Valley Girl* (1983), loosely based on *Romeo and Juliet* and exploiting the romance genre to commercial effect, is marginally more interesting as a forerunner to the plethora of 'teen pic' takes on Shakespeare's plays that characterise the nineties onwards.

Presumably, when they secured the services of a world renowned auteur as director of their version of *King Lear*, Cannon expected Godard to fill the eighties void by producing a work of cinematic 'high art' that would give them a way in to markets beyond their well-trodden genre path. Sadly for Cannon and audiences alike, Godard achieves his 'darker purpose', having continued down his own undeniably self-indulgent path, leaving Kurosawa, unchallenged, to construct the 'canonical' *Lear* of the decade.

¹ Susan Bennett, "Godard and *Lear*: Trashing the Can(n)on", *Theatre Survey*, 39:1, (1998), p.14.

² *Ibid.*, p.12.

³ Kenneth Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge, 1999), p.212.

⁴ Allardyce Nicoll, *Film and Theatre* (London, 1936), p.2-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁶ Sinyard, p.23.

⁷ David Impastato, "Godard's *Lear*: Why is it so Bad?" *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 12:3, Summer 1994, p.38.

⁸ McKee, *Story*, p.88.

⁹ Jessica Maerz, "Godard's *King Lear*: Referents Provided Upon Request," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, 2004. p.3/5

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¹¹ Peter Donaldson, *Shakespearean Films/ Shakespearean Directors* (Massachusetts, 1990), pp. 189-190.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.192.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.219.

¹⁴ Maerz, p. 2/5.

¹⁵ Rothwell, pp.212-213.

¹⁶ Maerz, p.2/5

¹⁷ Maerz, p.3/5

¹⁸ Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford, 2000), p.12.

¹⁹ Impastato, p.39.

²⁰ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Theory and Practice: the Criticism of Jean-Luc Godard," *Sight and Sound*, 41.3, Summer, 1972.

3.5 “Radical art phalanx” versus “a clever flag of PR convenience”:¹ Kristian Levring’s *The King Is Alive* (2000)

The democratising and anarchic intent of the Dogme manifesto which proclaims in a loud voice that it will bring about “the ultimate democratization of the cinema” so that “for the first time, anyone can make a movie,”² is dispelled by the content of two of the first four Dogme films given their decidedly elitist, ‘high art’ affiliations. Nonetheless, some of the films produced by this set of film-makers are startlingly impressive. The ‘high culture’ Shakespearean nuances of both Vinterberg’s *Festen* (1998) and Levring’s *The King is Alive* (2000) may detract from the egalitarian philosophy supposedly driving this cinematic new wave but the manner in which these film-makers work with the ideas found in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* respectively demonstrates their capacity to work with a screen space as technologically bare as that of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage.

Stripped of technology in accordance with their manifesto’s edicts, the focus of each film comes back to two of the momentous forces at the heart of Shakespearean narration: character and language. Both *Festen* and *The King Is Alive* use Shakespeare as a source of inspiration but there is no attempt to reappropriate the narratives of either *Hamlet* or *King Lear* in their entirety, though there are undeniable connections between the predicaments of characters found in all four: familial and patriarchal failure, sexual inadequacies and identity crises abound. And true to Dogme’s commitment to create films which are realistic, character-driven ensembles rather than sensationalistic convention-ridden set pieces, each film takes as its focus the exploration of the psyche and the relationships of its protagonists in real time, avoiding both the kind of fragmented,

narrative pyrotechnics of the so-called 'art house' film and the more fantastical elements of genre cinema.

For Kristian Levring and his Dogme colleague, Thomas Vinterberg, the screened Shakespeare 'void' had long passed by the advent of the Dogme New Wave. Vinterberg's *Festen* (1998) and Levring's *The King is Alive* entered a market place already saturated by adaptations of Shakespeare's plays of both a costume drama type - no less than eleven being released between 1990 and 1999 - and less reverential genre renditions like teen romance *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999). Kenneth Branagh's tireless output in the nineties saw the release of costume drama versions of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), and *Love's Labours Lost* (1999), all of which attracted star-studded casts, but even his achievements are eclipsed by Baz Luhrmann whose *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet* (1996) out-performed all expectations, recouping almost its entire budget outlay during its opening weekend and securing release on 1276 screens in the USA, whilst Branagh's average opening weekend screen exposure was confined to two or three.³ By the end of the nineties, popular genre forms of the Shakespearean source text, ranging from costume drama to teen romance to action film, had been adopted by film-makers in pursuit of what Lanier terms a "legitimis[ation]" of mass market appeal.⁴ The trend continues into the new millennium with films like *O* (2001) delivering a high school take on *Othello* and *My Kingdom* (2001), a Brit. gangster twist on *King Lear*; even those retaining the Shakespearean verse, such as Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), seek a more teen friendly turn to the narrative, casting Hamlet as a much younger man preoccupied with both his love interest, Ophelia, and his angst-ridden dalliance with death. The most recent release, *She's the Man* (2006), adapts *Twelfth Night*

into the genre of teen comedy romance and the industry's faith in the increasingly mainstream marketability of such genre versions of Shakespeare is underlined by this film's release strategy: it opened on 2623 screens in the USA,⁵ an unprecedented number for a product affiliated with Shakespeare and its 'high art' leanings.

However, the number of art house versions of Shakespeare's plays produced during this era is considerably less. Genre cinema inspired by the bard seemed to lead a charmed box-office life in the nineties and the early part of the twenty-first century and though many costume drama versions of Shakespeare's plays also emerged in this period, it is the genre adaptation that garners commercial success. With the exception of Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) and Vinterberg's *Festen*, the market place seems to have been firmly taken over by genre-based adaptations of Shakespeare's plays or by heritage screen renditions of Shakespeare's plays. It is, therefore, doubly satisfying to encounter Levring's *The King is Alive* which moves us consciously away from what by now have become the more accepted mainstream Shakespearean re-workings to a *kind* of art house interpretation that, though eschewing all of the trappings of costume drama and genre-based approaches to the text, stays within the realms of credible, entertaining narrative cinema. Unlike his eighties predecessor, Jean-Luc Godard, Levring creates a meaningful dialogue with Shakespeare's text without losing sight of the market place entirely and without sacrificing characterisation and narrative momentum. Indeed, despite the disavowal of all things genre and all things Hollywood in their Dogme manifesto, the Dogme brethren take a somewhat tongue-in-cheek stance to their 'new wave' posturing, neither acknowledging or denying its capacity to

provide a novel marketing platform for their film product. Contemporary Hollywood's global domination of the cinema *is* challenged by the Dogme creed's call for film narratives which are not sensationalistic nor genre-based, and which are not produced in a climate of "technological tyranny,"⁶ but whilst the 'brethren' - consisting of founding 'brothers' Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, Soren Kragh-Jacobsen and Kristian Levring - do challenge the Hollywood dominated status quo, their ideas and motivations tend to echo those of bygone eras rather than offer the kind of radicalisation the rhetoric of their manifesto lays claim to. Aalback Jensen, Managing Director of the 'brethren's' production company Zentropa, admits "there is nothing new to this Dogme movement," but "now and then every business needs a movement that tries something new, or at least tries to call it something new."⁷ Whether viewed as "radical art phalanx" or "a clever flag of PR convenience,"⁸ the Dogme 'New Wave' is really an old wave in disguise and its attempts to disassociate itself from commercial cinema is irrevocably undermined in Levring's case since seventy percent of his funding comes from American sources.

For Levring, Dogme script-writing is "really, really interesting because it's so much back to character writing," where "the only way you can solve problems is actually by solving your characters;" according to Levring his film is not *plot-driven* in any way and there are no arbitrary plot twists nor overtly realised generic expectations.⁹ However, his blatant denial of generic conventions is arguably a ruse: it is, after all, a survival story during the course of which a means to 'staying alive' is pursued, even if it takes the less conventional route of 'let's put on a show' to maintain group morale rather than half-hearted attempts to become hunter-gatherers. They do engage in stock survival genre actions, several of the

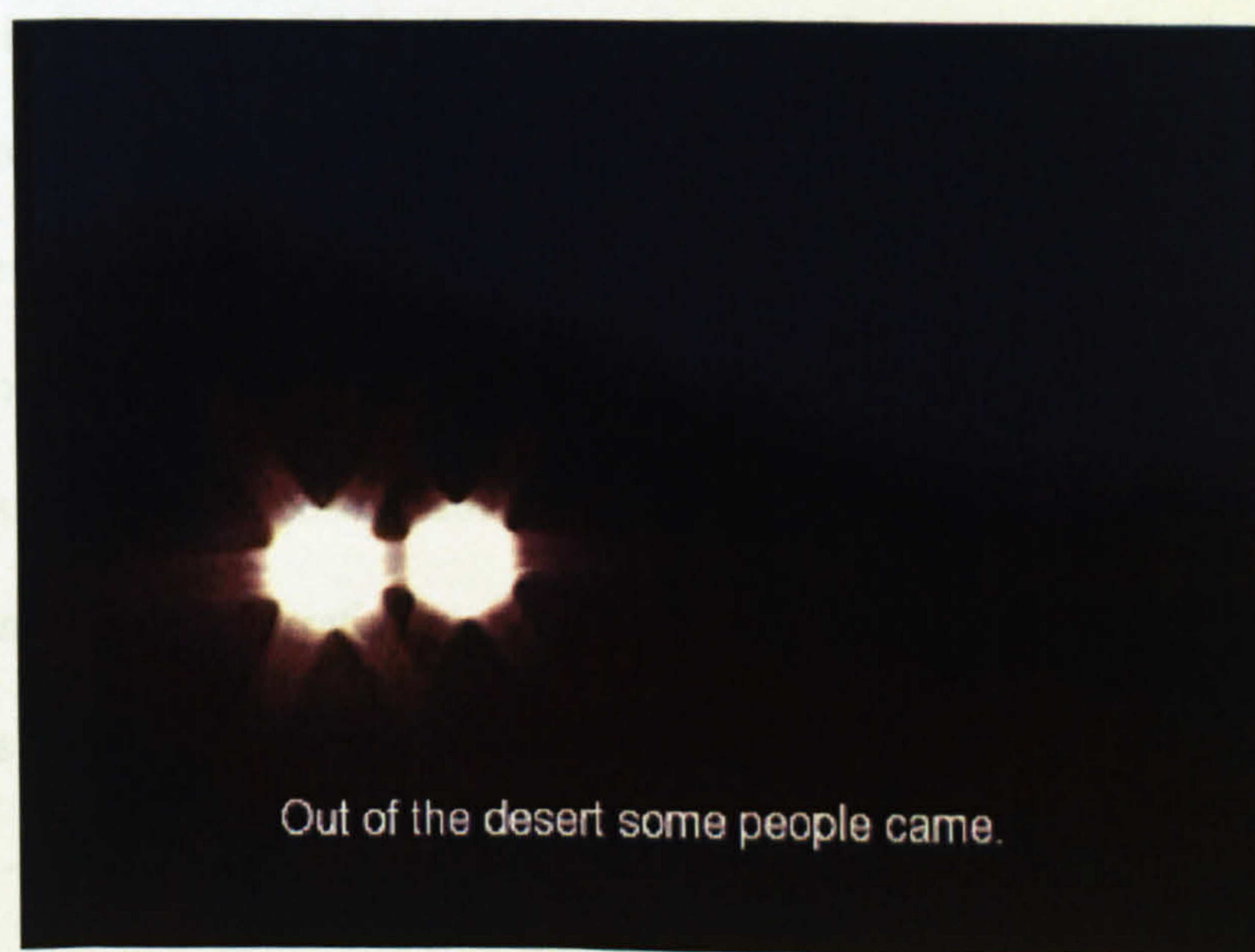
characters seeking to repair damaged shelters and to attract outside attention by constructing a system of reflecting light, whilst one of their party is sent out into the desert wilderness to find help. And yet it remains an unconventional rendition of the survival story, despite the fact that we are dealing with travellers stranded in the desert. Levring engages in a more organic mode of writing, his initial inspiration coming not from the narrative patterning of the survival story but from his recollection of a British friend, living in the Mojave Desert just outside California, who in order to assuage his homesickness, would organise impromptu Shakespeare evenings: "he['d] get Chuck, the man who runs the gas station to be Hamlet, and Liz from the diner to be Ophelia, and they['d] just sit around and read the play."¹⁰ From this reference point Levring assembled a cast of fifty potential characters; then - with the aid of co-writer Anders Thomas Jensen -began the process of deciding who would make it on to the bus, dependent upon character type and interesting matches. It is at this point that Shakespeare's *King Lear* comes to the fore, acting as a vehicle through which the characters may find themselves, and bringing into focus aspects of their personality hitherto unacknowledged. Levring sees *The King is Alive* as a film about "what happens to people... when they start thinking about who they are,"¹¹ and their predicament as stranded travellers in a forbidding wilderness, when coupled with the film's exploration of identity, offers obvious parallels with Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Although at first drawn to *Hamlet* - a play which remains an intertextual reference point at various moments within the film's narrative - Levring's decision to explore his characters through the staging of *King Lear* instead is also conditioned by the absurdist nature of both the play and the travellers' attempts to perform it under such adverse conditions. The narrative momentum of the film is

shaped around the literary conceit of staging the play, echoing Shakespeare's use of a similar conceit in *Hamlet* where the play-within-a-play is designed to 'catch the conscience of the king', and investing the film with a certain level of theatricality. Levring's literary conceit mirrors the performance mode of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. Stern points out that in both eras the lines of each actor were written onto separate 'rolls' and given in isolation.¹² Here, it is Henry, former actor turned Hollywood script-reader, who reproduces the play from memory and redistributes the lines to suit the people he has to work with, and it is his predicament, as an ageing man who has 'lost' his daughter which in part preordains the choice of *King Lear* as the play they are to 'perform'. As he looks upon Charles practising his golf swing and the elderly, alcoholic American performing a jig against the backdrop of the desert wilderness, he recalls lines from *King Lear*, reciting "Is man no more than this?" and acknowledging the parallels between their situation and that of the characters caught up in Shakespeare's narrative. Henry sees both as performing a "fantastic striptease act of basic human needs" and proceeds to reconstruct Shakespeare's text from memory, his act of textual recreation echoing that of Godard's Shakespeare Junior and emulating the practice of 'remembering' and recording Shakespeare's works, post-performance, in the Quarto and Folio editions of his plays.

However, whilst Henry's intention is ostensibly to use the play as a vehicle to bring the group together and to keep up their spirits, for Levring it is a device which allows him not only to explore the inner psyche of his characters but also to interrogate the role of language and the very act of storytelling. In this, he mirrors Shakespeare's preoccupation with character development and language as the mainstay of the storyteller's art. Martha Nochimson argues that narrative is recast

by Levring, taking it beyond the confines of “ordinary plot”¹³ and into the realms of what she terms “a continuous, collaborative, spontaneous, humanizing act of narrative.” Narrative becomes the “catalytic agent” used to explore “complex communal processes.”¹⁴ Furthermore, her contention that we are “story-making animals” who “rely on old narratives that attempt to speak of nobility and continuity”¹⁵ is reinforced within the film by the presence of Kanana as narrator of the travellers’ tale. The film opens with an aerial shot of the desert sky, and Kanana’s voice-over, spoken in his native language and translated in subtitles, establishes an immediate sense of the foreignness of the landscape. Visually, the frame focuses on an indistinct image of headlights approaching as he tells of “strangers full of fear coming out of the desert,” as if from nowhere, lending the moment a fable-like quality and signalling to the audience the commencement of a story filtered through his memory, his language and his cultural perspective rather than from a Western narrative viewpoint.



3.15 *The King Is Alive* (2000)

It is the *process* of narration which becomes all important in this film, conventional narrative momentum being sidelined to such an extent that the arrival of rescuers who signal survival - and thus closure for this 'survival' narrative - goes unheeded by the stranded travellers who continue to recite lines from *King Lear* over Gina's funeral pyre.

Immediately, the significance of storytelling is foregrounded and we are immersed in the comforting conventions of such an act. Our narrator is inevitably 'unreliable' since he tells of moments he cannot possibly have had access to, but we are swept along with the power of his narration and we accept his 'version' of events just as the travellers accept Henry's 'version' of *King Lear*. Levring reinforces the notion that storytelling is an essentially comforting process when Gina insists that Catherine tell her a tale in French: despite her incapacity to comprehend the language Gina finds the shared act of narration soothing, even though, ironically, Catherine's tale is about the stupidity and ignorance of her fellow travellers, Gina in particular. Kanana's narration is minimalistic: his use of language is functional and direct, suggesting that the power of the narration here comes through memories reconfigured visually rather than orally and in some ways offering a commentary on the operational differences between the visual medium of film and the linguistic medium of oral storytelling and prose narratives. The story closes with remembered scenes of the moving bus taken from the start of the narrative, as if they are being replayed in his mind. He concludes their story and the film with the lines "They are not here now. They are gone," re-establishing the notion that they are the stuff of fable: transient and insubstantial, alive only for as long as we have storytellers to tell their tale, as is

also true of the works of Shakespeare, recorded and printed in hindsight after the era of their production.

Here, Levring is engaging in ideas similar to those raised in Godard's *King Lear* where we are forced to examine our relationship with the Ur-texts of our cultural heritage, but Levring's Kanana is a much more credible cypher for the successful interrogation of this relationship than Godard's bizarre Professor Pluggy could ever be. His is a voice that stands outside Western culture, providing us with the kind of objective perspective Godard seeks, unsuccessfully, to construct through Pluggy, whose incoherent, inaudible ramblings defy belief and fail to connect at the level of emotion or intellect, narrative or ideology.



3.16 *The King Is Alive* (2000)

The one 'character' that persists beyond the confines of Kanana's remembered story is the landscape: it provides the film's opening and closing images and its capacity to endure invests it with a majestic presence similar to that afforded to the landscape in Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*. A number of sequences throughout the film foreground the silent beauty of the desert landscape. The opening sequence

(employing an aerial shot and thus working against a fundamental dogme edict which outlaws the use of expensive technology)¹⁶ pitches the vastness and the tranquillity of the desert against shots of confined, noisy spaces inside the travellers' dilapidated bus.



3.17 *The King Is Alive* (2000)

In the closing sequence we cut to a silent five second panning shot of the empty desert, suggesting it remains undisturbed by the invasion of the once stranded travellers. Since Dogme directors must use only 'found' sets, available light and the props to hand,¹⁷ the choice of location is of central importance - even more so in this instance as Levring gives such cinematic prominence to his setting. For Levring the "found location is inextricably linked to the writing of the screenplay"; he sees it as "a crucial part of the writing process in a Dogme film."¹⁸ After finding his location - the Kolmanskop Desert in Namibia - Levring amended his first draft in response to the tensions and the atmosphere of his chosen setting, implying once more an organic mode of screenwriting as part of the Dogme film-making process.

Characterised by its size and its silence, Levring's location emphasises one of the central problematics explored in this film. The silences of the desert and the minimal narratorial interjections of Kanana point to the redundancy of language as a means of effective communication. This discourse on the redundancy of language extends to the travellers. Kanana notes on various occasions that:

They ate less and they spoke words. Together
they said words they still didn't say them to
each other.

His commentary refers on one level to the Shakespearean verse each traveller is rehearsing, but it also serves as a commentary on their inability to use their own language to communicate and to connect with each other at this stage. We have a series of such double-edged commentaries played over his blurred and distorted memories of the travellers, one of which acknowledges not only his inability to understand their language but also their own incapacity to make sense of what they say: he states "I didn't understand a word they said. Nor did they." By using the rehearsal mode in his screenplay, Levring creates added layers of meaning, leading us to question the redundancy of words spoken without any true understanding of their import, be they the words of Shakespeare or our everyday vocabulary. Since Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a play which is notably preoccupied with the redundancy of language, Lear's reiteration of Cordelia's line, "Nothing," reverberating throughout the text, Levring's decision to explore the role of language in his film text is particularly apt as is his decision to foreground the artificiality of the literary conceit he is employing as a means to character development.

Like Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Levring's film retains a certain theatrical self-consciousness: for some audiences this adds to its resonance, for others it detracts from its energy as a piece of emotionally engaging dramatic cinema. Peter Yates's *The Dresser* (1983) presents us with another theatrically self-conscious reworking of the *Lear* narrative. Ronald Harwood's screenplay establishes its theatricality and its parallels with the *Lear* text at a much more literal level. Sir is the tyrannical lead actor/father figure of a travelling theatre company/'family'; questions of loyalty and betrayal within this theatrical 'family' are written into the narrative and there are the identifiable 'battles' between the old order - represented by Sir, his dresser/fool, Norman, and stage manager, Kent/Madge - and a new order, in the guise of the scheming Irene, an amalgamation of Cordelia, Regan and Goneril, and the rebellious Oxenby, a pseudo Edmund who openly states "I look forward to a new order. I want a company without tyrants," and yet, when asked who would then be in charge answers, "I would." Sir's identity crisis also echoes that of Lear, though again the parallels are translated in a literal sense as Sir blackens his face for a performance of *Othello* when he should be playing King Lear. As in *The King Is Alive*, reality and theatrics merge: after witnessing the destruction caused by the bombs dropped in this World War II setting, Sir momentarily loses his sanity, his irrational behaviour mirroring that of the outcast Lear on the heath. The narrative here is driven by backstage dramas, focusing predominantly upon Sir's dresser, Norman, but staged scenes from *King Lear* punctuate the inevitable downfall of Sir - and by inference, his dresser - lending the film a different kind of theatrical realisation to that attained by Levring's *The King Is Alive*. The theatrical moments in *The Dresser* are staged performances and the film's connections with the *Lear* text are written into both

its narrative and its character constructs; in *The King is Alive* it is the *language* of the *Lear* text, filtered through Henry's memory and connecting with this random collection of characters in a more private manner, that establishes its intertextual engagement with *King Lear*.

It is through Shakespeare's language rather than through their own shared language that the travellers finally reach a point of self-realisation and communal connection. The travellers are encouraged by Henry to find their own meaning in the words, rather than to 'perform' some highly theatrical version thereof, again echoing the sentiments expressed within Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as Hamlet speaks with the players about the art of acting. Levring says that Liz's line - "I need to know something about who these people are"- is "a classic comment you get from actors." But through Henry, Levring argues that "you have to find this in the words," and in so doing, "find [yourself] in this text."¹⁹ Like Shakespeare Junior in Godard's *King Lear*, Henry operates as the 'prompter-conductor',²⁰ noted as an essential component of the rehearsal process during the production of plays in Shakespeare's era. Henry tells Amanda, for example, to seek her own meaning in the verses spoken by the fool, urging her to "Listen to what the fool has to say to [her]" and it is through learning to hear the truth behind these lines that she gains the strength to speak out in her own voice, rejecting her bullying, racist husband:

I don't know you anymore. We don't know
each other. I always knew you were nothing
special...I just wanted a peaceful life.

You're ridiculous.

The *Lear* text is not reconstructed in any precise manner. We hear only snippets from the play and the lines of *various* characters are at times spoken by *one*

traveller; Liz, seemingly in role as Goneril, is also given Regan's lines. Similarly there is no chronological delivery of Shakespeare's lines: as Ray ambles out into the desert, in a suicidal frame of mind due to his wife's constant flaunting of her desire for Moses, he utters Kent's closing line – "I have a journey shortly to go,/ My master calls, I must not say no" (5.3:320-321) - but then proceeds to recite lines at random, his mental instability reflected in his disjointed delivery.

Levring's use of the Shakespearean language, though severely edited and taken out of its original context, is reverential; it leads us to examine its meaning in closer detail than adaptations which aim for 'fidelity' and in so doing he gives greater prominence to Shakespeare's language than numerous, more 'faithful' renditions. As his characters come to an understanding of Shakespeare's language in their own terms, they simultaneously come to an understanding of themselves and Shakespeare's language becomes the privileged mode of discourse, pitted against the silences of the desert landscape, the clipped narration of Kanana, the empty conversations of the English-speaking travellers.

According to Levring, the best thing about Dogme is its capacity to "force the truth out of the characters and settings";²¹ the best thing about Shakespeare's verse is its capacity to force out similar truths and by focusing on the meaning behind the words Levring constructs a film text which encapsulates more of the *essence* of the 'borrowed' text than other screen adaptations that are overly preoccupied with either the visual recreation of the images conjured by Shakespeare's language, or with recreating the narrative template of *King Lear*.

King Lear is deconstructed as it is reconstructed during the course of Levring's film, echoing the play's themes and mirroring its ideas as a foil to character development. However, the film is one of those narratives that seems to

invite critical theorising of the kind that detracts from its energy as a piece of effective, dramatic cinema. Näively taking the Dogme manifesto to heart, Amy Scott-Douglass holds the film up as a shining example of this Danish new wave's "critical stance against Hollywood";²² she cites Henry's transcription of Shakespeare's lines onto the back of a Hollywood blockbuster script titled *Space Killers* as "a metaphor for Levring's dogmatic desire to replace Hollywood junk with good films,"²³ rather than seeing it as a light-hearted jibe at Hollywood's expense. Her reading of the film text first and foremost as a statement about the current state of cinema, in which Gina represents both the vacuous stupidity of the Hollywood system and its audience whilst Catherine, who "has the correct approach to art and a natural affinity to Shakespeare,"²⁴ represents European cinema, is incredibly flawed: it smacks of the kind of cultural elitism supposedly abhorred by the 'brothers'. Such an interpretation reads character at a purely conceptual level, negating the dramatic energies found in both Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Levring's film. Gina may initially be portrayed as an empty-headed American tourist but Levring's development of her character as an increasingly vulnerable Cordelia-like figure is engineered to evoke our sympathies and she emerges as a much more likeable individual than the distanced, intellectual Catherine who, guilty of poisoning Gina, is ultimately aligned with the murderous Goneril.

Levring's characterisation in *The King is Alive* is extremely complex since he chooses to merge not only lines spoken by Shakespeare's characters but personality traits also. Charles is typical of the complicated character constructs created by Levring: he is Gloucester, Lear, Edmund and Cordelia. His pride and his inability to communicate with his son, Paul, echo Gloucester's incompetent

handling of filial relationships and there are traces of Lear in Charles' personality too. His bizarre declaration of love for Gina and his arrogant belief that she will automatically return that love echo both Lear's demands for displays of daughterly affection and the incestuous sexual subtext found in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. His pride, his preoccupation with ageing and losing power similarly underscore his Lear-like qualities, but the vulnerability he shares with Lear is overshadowed by the darker facets of his nature and it is Henry who embodies the more empathetic elements of Shakespeare's protagonist. Furthermore, when rejected Charles' actions mirror those of Edmund whose capacity to humiliate women he more than equals: once rejected by Gina/ Cordelia he urinates on her as she lies dying. His death combines aspects of Edmund's and Cordelia's demise. Like Cordelia, he is hanged at the close but his death, like that of Edmund, is a final act of wilful self-destruction. Both Charles and Edmund accept their fate, preparing for it in a ritualistic manner, the one donning his armour the other his shirt and tie. And as with Edmund, Charles' death is not acknowledged by the others, no heed being paid to the image of his corpse suspended above Gina's dead body.



3.18 *The King Is Alive* (2000)

Levring's character constructs form part of an intellectual puzzle for the audience: we engage in his reconstruction of Shakespeare's text, piecing together the lines and identifying character traits as we too learn to make meaning.

And yet we are not encouraged to view his characters as abstract concepts in the manner suggested by Scott-Douglass. Levring's directorial style ensures this: his emphasis is upon performance. Although conscious of avoiding the Dogme New Wave's style signature of over-use of the hand-held camera, Levring argues that it has a very important function since it provides performative freedom for his actors, their movement and interactions remaining unimpeded by the technology.²⁵ Unlike Hollywood productions, filming is chronological, ensuring a sense of narrative and performative continuity which deals in what Levring terms "real time," the "line between rehearsal and shooting becom[ing] blurred."²⁶ Temporal and geographical reality are retained in accordance with Dogme intent and the end product achieves a sense of immediacy and credibility despite its literary conceits. The so-called experimental style of the Dogme New Wave does, however, bare striking similarities to Brook's counter-cinematic approach to the filming of *King Lear* back in the seventies: both directors employ jump cuts, canted shots, static frames of considerable duration. And like Brook, Levring privileges the word over and above the use of emotionally manipulative non-diegetic score. Whilst Levring's choice is in part preordained by the Dogme rule which forbids the use of sound produced independent of image,²⁷ his adherence to this particular edict enhances audience engagement, leaving us free to respond without the intrusive signalling of a melodramatic soundtrack, heightening the dramatic impact of shots of the silent desert backdrop. Shot

entirely in digital video on location, Leving's film has a similarly grainy, low budget look to that of Brook's *King Lear*, despite being in colour and later transferred to Academy 35 mm stock. Its visual spectacle is achieved not via costly production values but through careful choice of location, and its conscious rejection of many facets of mainstream cinematic language results in a recycled version of *King Lear* which defies conservative, heritage genre expectations. It presents us with a fragmentary take on the narrative, employing low budget strategies which are in direct opposition to the high production values of the majority of adaptations of filmed Shakespeare in its purest sense.

The Dogme new wave brethren seek a revitalisation and democratisation of the film industry by challenging the hold Hollywood exerts over global cinema. Leving and Vinterberg *also* strive to produce *democratised*, accessible reworkings of Shakespearean texts which have been colonised by 'high culture' for far too long. Critic Jennifer Bottinelli points out that, unlike other screened Shakespeare adaptations which employ the rehearsal mode, such as Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996), Leving's use of this theatrical premise "works against the master narrative of Shakespeare," deconstructing and then reconstructing the text as "a frenzied commentary on filial and spousal rivalry."²⁸ According to Bottinelli such "co-optation" produces a film which "exhibits a delicate balance of interpretation and originality with regard to the tradition of Shakespeare."²⁹ However, by revolving his drama around what may be construed as a contrived literary conceit, Leving is in danger of turning the film into the kind of intellectual *exercise* he claims to abhor.³⁰ Screenwriter Peter Chumo argues that whilst fascinating in an academic sense, the film fails to connect at an emotional level,³¹ thus negating the idea that Dogme films are 'democratising,'

character-driven dramas. Perhaps the difference lies in the gap between words conveyed in written form within the context of a screenplay and words projected in performance: Richard Kelly acknowledges that “on the page [*The King is Alive*] is a kind of savage sitcom, encased in a brilliant but *vulnerable* literary conceit” but when “projected it has gravity and pathos.”³² When projected it invites us to engage with Shakespeare’s verse on both an intellectual and an emotional plane, presenting us with an adaptation that takes us back to the abstractions of the Elizabethan stage on which the meaning behind the words held the truth to the drama performed on its boards, back to narrative momentum that can be sustained without recourse to the expensive regalia of Hollywood filmmaking.

¹ Jonathan Romney, “Overruled,” *New Statesman*, Oct. 4th, 1999.

² *Dogme95 Manifesto*, March 13th, 1995. <http://www.dogme95>, 1/10/2006.

³ Figure from <http://www.imdb.com>, 23/4/2006.

⁴ Douglas Lanier, “Shakespeare and Cultural Studies: An Overview,” *Shakespeare*, Vol. 2:1, Dec. ’06.

⁵ Figure from <http://www.imdb.com>, 23/4/2006.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard Kelly, *The Name of the Book is Dogme95* (London, 2000), p.88.

⁸ Jonathan Romney, “Overruled,” *New Statesman*, Oct. 4th, 1999.

⁹ Kristian Levring in interview with Peter Chumo, “Script Comments”, *Creative Screenwriting*, Vol. 8, Pt 4, 2001, p.20.

¹⁰ Kristian Levring in interview with Richard Kelly, *The Name of the Book is Dogme95* (London, 2000), p.49.

¹¹ Levring in Kelly, p. 50.

¹² Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal From Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford, 2000), p.10.

¹³ Martha Nochimson, “the King Is Alive,” *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 55, Issue 2, 2001, pp.52-54.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.52-54.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.54.

¹⁶ Dogme Manifesto, Rule Three: The camera must be hand-held.

¹⁷ Ibid., Rule One: Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets cannot be brought in; Rule four: The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable.

¹⁸ Levring in Chumo, p.22.

¹⁹ Levring in Kelly, p.213.

²⁰ Stern, p.121.

²¹ Levring in Kelly, p.217.

²² Amy Scott-Douglass, “Dogme Shakespeare 95: European Cinema, Anti-Hollywood Sentiment and the Bard,” *Shakespeare the Movie II: Popularising the Plays on Film, Television and DVD*, eds. Richard Burt and Lynda Boose (London and New York, 2003), p.253.

²³ Ibid., p. 259.

²⁴ Ibid., p.260.

²⁵ Peter Rundle, “An Aesthetic Choice: excerpts from a phone interview given by Kristian Levring,” Nov. 10th, 1999, http://www.dogme95.dk/news/interview/levring_interview.htm 10/10/2006.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dogme Manifesto, Rule Two: The sound must never be produced apart from images and vice-versa.

²⁸ Jennifer Bottinelli, "Watching Lear: Resituating the Gaze at the Intersection of Film and Drama in Kristian Levring's *The King is Alive*," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol.33, Issue 2, p.102.

²⁹ Ibid.,p.102.

³⁰ Levring in Kelly, pp.213-214.

³¹ Chumo, p.20.

³² Ibid., p.209.

Conclusion

According to Ramona Wray we are experiencing the “advent of a Shakespeare on film boom” which brings with it a body of criticism that has become “a discrete and increasingly canonical discipline.”¹ That there is a ‘boom’ is surely a positive; that there is a persistent tendency to treat the film products of this boom as texts which require critical dissection of a particular kind within the parameters of a ‘discrete’ and – even more problematic – ‘canonical discipline’ is far from positive. It is detrimental to the study of Shakespeare on screen. Despite the growth of the screened Shakespeare industry and the increasing interest it generates in certain critical quarters there remains a divide between those who approach the adaptations from a literary perspective and those who are working from the film academic’s standpoint. At a time when the two disciplines of film and literature should be converging in their debate about Shakespeare on film, each remains entrenched in its own academic area, each maintaining its own literary or filmic bias. This study works towards convergence of the two disciplines at both a critical and a practical level.

Rather than perpetuating the kind of ‘canonical’ approach endemic in the field, I have entered into meaningful debate about the historically neglected, genre-based, cinematic off-shoots of *King Lear*, moving discussion away from auteurist preoccupations to issues related to the relationship between film genre and literary genre. Similarly, those film versions deemed ‘canonical’ are explored through the lens of genre and, unlike other recently published studies which tend to replicate the inherent elitism of Shakespeare on screen criticism, this study aims to open up discussion by acknowledging the worth of mainstream genre readings of the play as well as those ‘art house’ products which continue to monopolise

critical studies. The field of Shakespeare and genre cinema has, until now, been either ignored, dealt with in passing or represented as the one isolated essay within a collection² - invariably an essay that focuses on art house and canonical film texts, or the more acceptable face of heritage adaptations of Shakespeare's work. Publishing in 2007, Cartelli and Rowe's decision to examine 'art house' film products like *The King is Alive* (2000)³ rather than contemporaneous genre offshoots like Don Boyd's gangster version of *King Lear* (*My Kingdom*, 2001) reflects academia's persistent preoccupation with what it regards as 'high art' over and above mainstream film product. Moreover, there is rarely a specific section dedicated to Shakespeare and genre cinema in studies new or old: Maurice Hindle's recent study, published in 2007, does devote a section to Shakespeare and genre cinema - *Communicating Shakespeare on Film: Modes, Styles, Genres* - but his ruminations add little of substance to the debate; twenty-two pages are devoted to this chapter yet only ten focus on genre related issues at a very basic and generalised level, and his critique of *Kumonosu-Jô* (1957) within this section adds nothing to the genre debate.⁴

There is a growing body of criticism which engages with the Shakespeare teen-pic phenomenon of the late nineties and early years of this century, but again critical discussions of such teen movies tend to appear as discrete essays within collections. In his recently published *One Hundred Shakespeare Films*⁵ Daniel Rosenthal hints at the significance of Shakespeare and genre cinema but his study offers more of an overview than an academic exploration of the relationship between the two. My thesis offers a different critical entry point, using the concept of genre as a construct that foregrounds the intertextual dependency of the source text and its cinematic offspring. It opens up new pathways into genre specific

exploration of other screen adaptations based on Shakespeare's plays, taking us beyond the realms of the heritage film and the teen-pic and into the less charted territory of cinematic off-shoots which bear the indelible imprint of the bard yet retain their own cinematic genre identity. Just as film versions of *King Lear* present us with a wide range of genre types, Shakespeare's other tragedies in particular have translated to screen in a multitude of generic reconfigurations: the field is now ripe for further study of specific films from a genre specific perspective that brings together the two disciplines of film and literature.

Current studies which focus solely on context rather than content offer a different way in to the examination of Shakespeare on screen, freeing the film text from discussions concerning its treatment of the source text. Throughout this study I remain conscious of contextual issues: the cultural and industry-based influences upon existing screen versions of *King Lear* are considered as much a part of the adaptive landscape as the adapted text itself. However, what is unique about my approach is my engagement with such contextual issues at a practical level. By writing my own screen version of *King Lear* I have been actively engaged in the process of transformation from one medium to another, working through the various theories of adaptation, restructuring the narrative in order to place it into its contemporary cultural terrain, and showing an awareness of industry-related pressures. Actively engaging in the adaptation of Shakespeare's work within the parameters of a film specific genre has taken me into a different critical territory that casts light on the parallels between theatrical genres and their cinematic counterparts. Genre has historically provided accessible codes and conventions for both the storyteller and her audience: its narrative patterns generate malleable story templates for the prose writer, the playwright and the

modern-day screen writer alike. The translation of Shakespeare's verse to screen remains problematic but the classic story design at the heart of his narratives and his construction of archetypal characters translate to a wide range of cinematic genre templates with ease.

Courtney Lehmann notes that where cinema once turned to Shakespeare for "cultural legitimation" it is now Shakespeare that needs cinema "for cultural longevity."⁶ In the modern world, visual literacy on a global scale transcends what Lehmann refers to as "more traditional reading practices."⁷ As such, the codes and conventions offered by cinematic genres become of increasing significance to the screened Shakespeare industry: they provide cinematic shorthand for today's visually literate audiences and offer supportive narrative networks for those unfamiliar with the source text being translated to screen. Contrary to French, Keyishian argues that Shakespeare on film will not develop towards a "standard, self-contained genre;" rather, it will become dispersed, finding its place "among existing pop genres."⁸ We, therefore, need to ponder what exactly constitutes 'Shakespeare on screen' in a modern viewing context. The popularity of loose adaptations to the small screen is attested by the success of the BBC's *ShakespeaRe-Told* series broadcast in November 2005, and there are an ever-growing collection of performance-based pieces related to Shakespeare appearing on sites like YouTube. As public access to performative space becomes more and more attainable, our definitions will expand rather than contract as the vitality of what Lanier terms 'Shakespop'⁹ breathes new life into Shakespeare and his work. But, as Ramona Wray attests, whilst the assessing of such "sub-species" of "Bardic renovation" forms an important area of study, we must also assess individual renditions of screened Shakespeare as "discrete achievements."¹⁰

Genre-based adaptations of Shakespeare's plays should be embraced as 'discrete achievements': they are inventive intertextual readings worthy of critical consideration in their own right rather than as the poor relations of heritage and *avant garde* versions of his work.

For the academic writing from a genre perspective, the lack of dialogue between the disciplines of film and literature proves problematic: for some publications, discussion is too film-centred whilst for others it is too Shakespearean. Adaptations journals do offer a middle ground and a much needed outlet for the kind of debate which falls short of the remit for journals whose focus is 'Shakespeare' or 'Film', but the ghettoisation of debate works to the detriment of both disciplines and, more significantly, to the detriment of Shakespeare and the screen reincarnations of his plays. This study brings the two disciplines together via a practical and a critical exploration of ways in which Shakespeare is 'reconfigured' in relation to genre cinema; it proposes a way forward for the ever-blossoming discipline of Shakespeare film criticism which outlaws division and encourages convergence.

¹ Ramona Wray, "Shakespeare on Film in the New Millennium," *Shakespeare*, Vol.3:2, Dec. 2007.

² Harry Keyishian's "Shakespeare and Movie Genre," *The Cambridge Companion to Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000) provides a clear illustration of this.

³ Cartelli, Thomas and Katherine Rowe, eds. *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Oxford, 2007).

⁴ Maurice Hindle, *Studying Shakespeare on Film* (Houndsmill, Basingstoke, 2007).

⁵ Daniel Rosenthal, *One Hundred Shakespeare Films* (London, 2007).

⁶ Courtney Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains: Theatre to Film, Early Modern to Postmodern* (Ithaca and London, 2002), p.235.

⁷ Ibid., p.235.

⁸ Harry Keyishian, "Shakespeare and Movie Genre: the Case of Hamlet," *The Cambridge Companion to Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, 2000), p.81.

⁹ Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford, 2002).

¹⁰ Wray.

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Selective Filmography

- All That Heaven Allows*, USA, directed by Douglas Sirk, 1955.
- A Boy and his Dog*, USA, directed by L. Q. Jones, 1975.
- A Thousand Acres*, USA, directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1997
- Alien*, USA/GB, directed by Ridley Scott, 1979.
- Aliens*, USA, directed by James Cameron, 1986.
- Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, USA, directed by J. Lee Thompson, 1973.
- Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, USA, directed by Ted Post, 1970.
- Blade Runner: The Director's Cut*, USA, directed by Ridley Scott, 1992.
- Bonnie and Clyde*, USA, directed by Arthur Penn, 1967.
- Brief Encounter*, GB, directed by David Lean, 1945,
- Broken Arrow*, USA, directed by Delmer Daves, 1950.

Broken Lance, USA, directed by Edward Dmytryk, 1954.
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, USA, directed by George Roy Hill, 1969.
Clueless, USA, directed by Amy Heckerling, 1998.
Creep, UK, directed by Christopher Smith, 2005.
Deathline, UK, directed by Gary Sherman, 1972.
Devil's Doorway, USA, directed by Anthony Mann, 1951.
Easy Rider, USA, directed by Dennis Hopper, 1969.
Far From Heaven, USA, directed by Todd Haynes, 2002.
Festen, Denmark/Sweden, directed by Thomas Vinterberg, 1998.
Fight Club, USA, directed by David Fincher, 1999.
Hamlet, UK, directed by Laurence Olivier, 1948.
Hamlet, UK, directed by Tony Richardson, 1969.
Hamlet, USA, directed by Franco Zeffirelli, 1990.
Hamlet, UK, directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.
Hamlet, USA, directed by Michael Almereyda, 2000.
High Noon, USA, directed by Fred Zinnemann, 1952.
House of Strangers, USA, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1949.
Julius Caesar, UK, directed by Stuart Burge, 1970.
King Lear, UK, directed by Peter Brook, 1971.
King Lear, UK, directed by Steve Rumbelow, 1976.
King of Texas (TV), USA, directed by Uli Edel, 2002.
Korol Lir, Soviet Union, directed by Grigori Kozintsev, 1970.
Lord of the Flies, UK, directed by Peter Brook, 1963.
Macbeth, USA, directed by Roman Polanski, 1971.
Mad Max, Australia, directed by George Miller, 1979.
Mad Max II: The Road Warrior, Australia, George Miller, 1981.
Mad Max Beyond the Thunderdome, Australia/ USA, directed by George Miller and George Ogilvie, 1985.
Matador, Spain, directed by Pedro Almodóvar, 1986.
Matrix Reloaded, USA, directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2003.
My Kingdom, UK, directed by Don Boyd, 2001.
Ran, Japan/ France, directed by Akira Kurosawa, 1985.

Rosemary's Baby, USA, directed by Roman Polanski, 1968.

Shane, USA, directed by George Stevens, 1953.

Solaris, Soviet Union, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972.

Theatre of Blood, UK, directed by Douglas Hickox, 1973.

Terminator, USA, directed by James Cameron, 1984.

Terminator II: Judgement Day, USA, directed by James Cameron, 1991.

The Adventures of Oktyabrina, USSR, directed by Grigori Kozintsev, 1926.

The Bed Sitting Room, UK, directed by Richard Lester, 1969.

The Cloak, USSR, directed by Grigori Kozintsev, 1926.

The Dresser, UK, directed by Peter Yates, 1983.

The Godfather, USA, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, 1972.

The Godfather Part II, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, 1974.

The Godfather Part III, USA, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, 1990.

The Grapes of Wrath, USA, directed by John Ford, 1940.

The King is Alive, Sweden/ Denmark/ USA, directed by Kristian Levring, 2000.

The Matrix, USA, directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999.

The New Babylon, USSR, directed by Grigori Kozintsev, 1929.

The Searchers, USA, John Ford, 1955.

The Taming of the Shrew, Italy/USA, directed by Franco Zeffirelli, 1967.

The Wizard of Oz, USA, directed by Victor Fleming, 1939.

Twelve Monkeys, USA, directed by Terry Gilliam, 1995.

William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, USA, directed by Baz Luhrmann, 1996.

Written on the Wind, USA, directed by Douglas Sirk, 1956.

28 Days Later, UK, directed by Danny Boyle, 2002.

SOME PARTS
EXCLUDED
UNDER
INSTRUCTION
FROM THE
UNIVERSITY